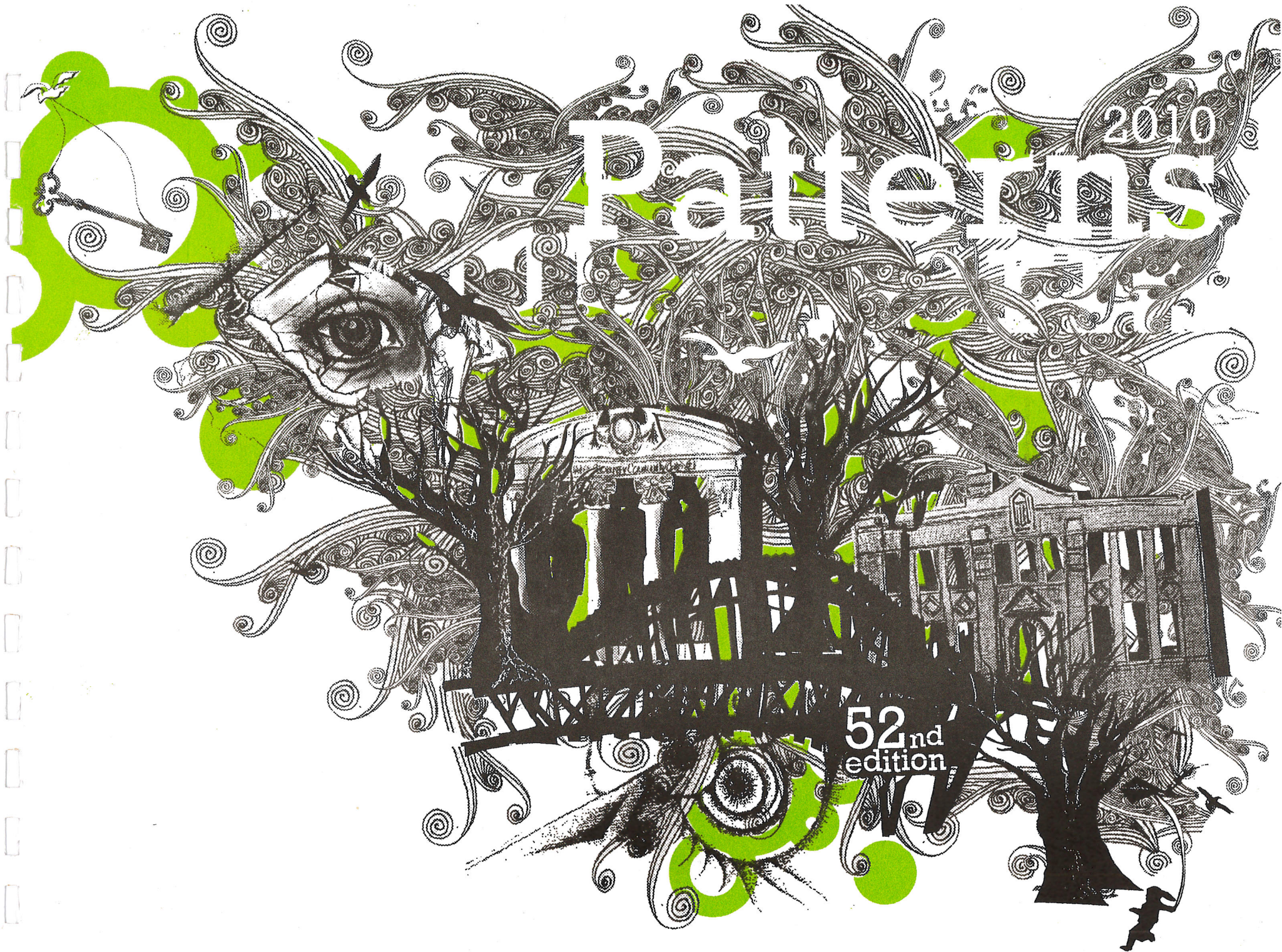
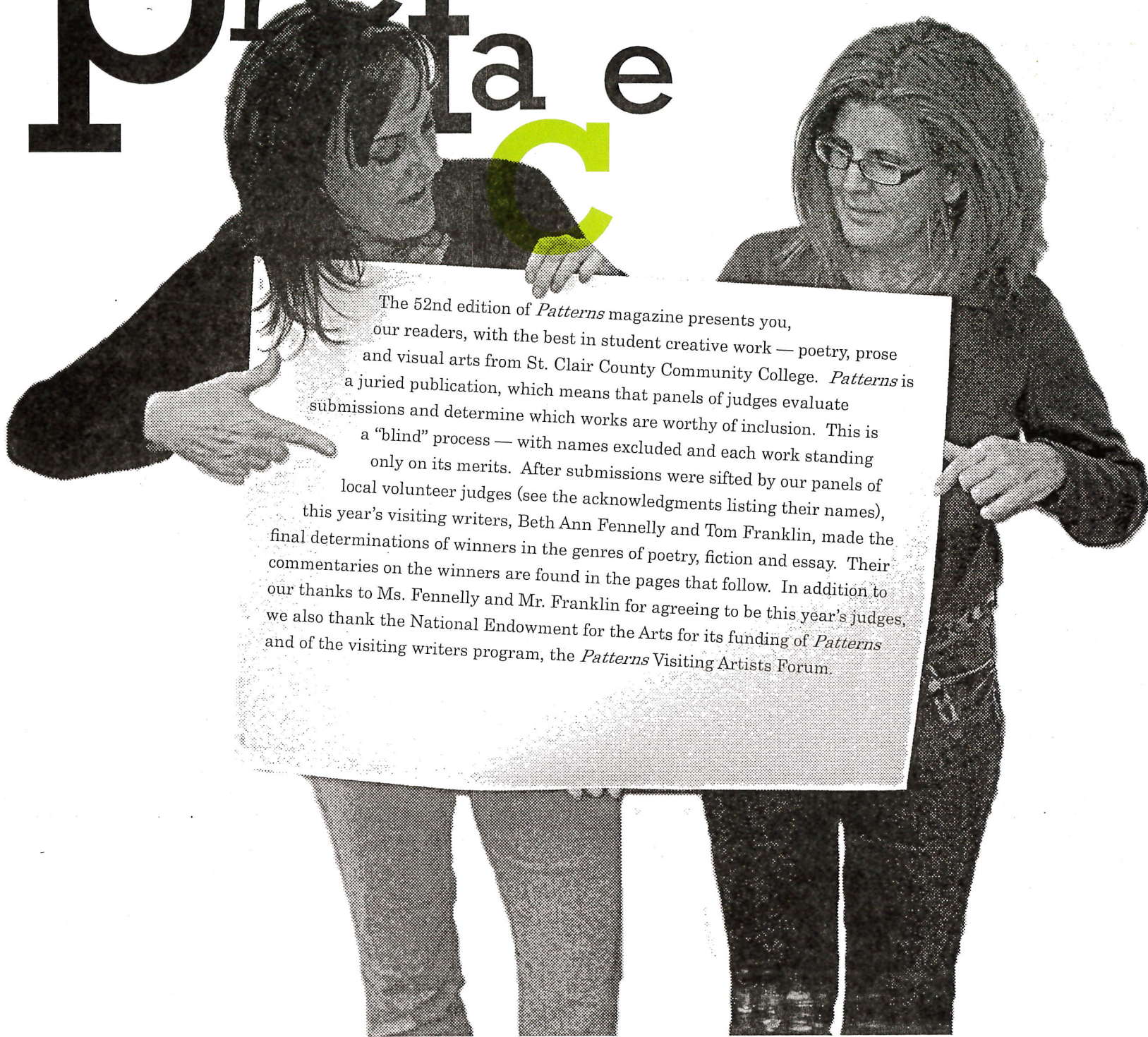


2010 Patterns

52nd
edition



Preface

A black and white photograph of two women standing and holding a large white rectangular sign. The woman on the left is pointing at the sign with her right hand. The woman on the right is also pointing at the sign with her right hand. They are both looking at the sign. The sign contains text about the 52nd edition of Patterns magazine.

The 52nd edition of *Patterns* magazine presents you, our readers, with the best in student creative work — poetry, prose and visual arts from St. Clair County Community College. *Patterns* is a juried publication, which means that panels of judges evaluate submissions and determine which works are worthy of inclusion. This is a “blind” process — with names excluded and each work standing only on its merits. After submissions were sifted by our panels of local volunteer judges (see the acknowledgments listing their names), this year’s visiting writers, Beth Ann Fennelly and Tom Franklin, made the final determinations of winners in the genres of poetry, fiction and essay. Their commentaries on the winners are found in the pages that follow. In addition to our thanks to Ms. Fennelly and Mr. Franklin for agreeing to be this year’s judges, we also thank the National Endowment for the Arts for its funding of *Patterns* and of the visiting writers program, the *Patterns* Visiting Artists Forum.

table

contents

of

art & writing

PREFACE - P. 1

VISITING AUTHORS - P. 4

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS - P. 5, 6

FRIENDS OF THE ARTS - P. 7

AWARD WRITING - P. 8

First Place Poetry:

Runge, Todd - *Surrealistic Breakfast*, P. 9

Second Place Poetry:

Britz, Tara - *The Dandelion*, P. 10

Eleanor Mathews Award:

Runge, Todd - *Still Life*, P. 11

Blanche Redman Award:

Lierman, Don - *Pop Goes*, P. 12

First Place Essay:

Kramer, Kirsten - *Squared*, P. 13-15

Second Place Essay:

Johnson, Charles - *Wake Up Time*, P. 16, 17

Kathy Nickerson Award

Gorzen, Andrew - *Scenes from a Horror Movie*, P. 18-20

First Place Story:

Smith, Michael - *Hard Lesson*, P. 21-23

Second Place Story:

McRae, Amanda - *Confessions of*

a Coat Closet, P. 24-27

Richard Colwell Award:

Runge, Todd - *Night About the Town*, P. 28-29

AWARD ART - P. 30

First Place Art:

Kindsvater, Edward - *Become, Reach, Broken Curiosity*, P. 31-33

Second Place Art:

Worden, Dave - *Skeleton*, P. 34

Third Place Art:

Krutsch, Emily - *C-Thru, Polarized*, P. 35, 36

MERIT WRITING - P. 37

Britz, Tara - *Wonder Years*, P. 38-40

Krul, Brittini - *Battling Fear*, P. 41-43

Hernandez, Oralee - *The Sweet Taste of Hunger*, P. 44

Kearney, Rachel - *Broken Silence*, P. 45-47

Meyer, Alexander - *Silhouette*, P. 48, 49

Stephens, Gordon - *You Can't Fool the Tooth Fairy*, P. 50, 51

Wagner, Max - *Tuesday*, P. 52-55

Koglin, Michele - *Breast Cancer*, P. 56

Koglin, Michele - *Cider Mill*, P. 57

Koglin, Michele - *Golden Heart*, P. 58

Koglin, Michele - *Promiscuous Girl*, P. 59

Runge, Todd - *Photographs in My Glove Box*, P. 60

Day, Christine - *Goodnight*, P. 61

Runge, Todd - *Eating Hallucinogenic Mushrooms and Hiking with Friends in the Great Smoky Mounts*, P. 62

Roulo, Nikki - *Flying*, P. 63

Runge, Todd - *To the Woman I Imagined*

While Asleep Last Night, P. 64

Roulo, Nikki - *Morning Freiheit*, P. 65

Day, Christine - *Family*, P. 66

Lierman, Don - *Stigmata*, P. 67

Allen, Krysten - *Forced Smile*, P. 68

Lierman, Don - *Mojo Chime*, P. 69

Wagner, Max - *Logic and Cheese*, P. 70

Coates, Nancy - *Sky Blue*, P. 71

Meyer, Alexander - *Forest-Fire*, P. 72

MERIT ART - P. 73

King, Rose - *Eye*, P. 74, 75

King, Rose - *Trio Hill*, P. 76

Linne, Justin - *Extrapolate*, P. 77

Padgham, Therese - *Sweet City*, P. 78

Pauli, Diane - *The "Me" Vase*, P. 79

Peterson, Karen - *Champy the Lake Champlain Monster*, P. 80

Pinskey, Twana - *Love 2009*, P. 81

Pinskey, Twana - *Fog On the Line*, P. 82

Sanchez, José - *Polygonal Emission*, P. 83

Scheaffer, Estelle - *Clips N Dots*, P. 84

Smith, Garrison - *Meus Levamentum Meus Vires*, P. 85

Sullivan, Kayla - *Robot Frog*, P. 86

Wolf, Bethany - *The Brooklyn Bridge*, P. 87

Nelson, Kurt - *Collected Things*, P. 88

Godinez, Erich - *Shaving History 1*, P. 89

Godinez, Erich - *Shaving History 2*, P. 90

Shepard, Josh - *Untitled*, P. 91

Bernard, Holly - *Silk Strips*, P. 92

Biernot, Brittany - *Illuminated Skeleton*, P. 93

DeFrane, David - *Circle Series*, P. 94-96

Cross, Lauren - *Science and Madness*, P. 97

Fenton, Paul - *White Charcoal*, P. 98

Kautz, Steven - *Oil Change*, P. 99

Krutsch, Emily - *Starfish*, P. 100

Krutsch, Emily - *Drowning*, P. 101

VISITING AUTHORS



BETH ANN FENNELLY

Beth Ann Fennelly is an accomplished writer and teacher. She has an MFA from the University of Arkansas (1998) and has taught at a number of colleges and universities. She is an assistant professor at the University of Mississippi. She has published three books of poetry, *Unmentionables* (2008), *Tender Hooks* (2004) and *Open House* (2001), which won the Kenyon Review Prize and a GLCA New Writers Award. She also has published a book of non-fiction, *Great With Child* (2006), as well as three chapbooks. Her poems have been widely published and anthologized; furthermore, she has published articles on creative writing in numerous prestigious literary journals and magazines, such as the *Kenyon Review*, *Southern Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. She has received numerous awards, fellowships and grants. She has been selected for two Pushcart Prizes in poetry and twice for The Best American Poetry series. She also received an NEA award (2004). Her fellowships include Bread Loaf Writer's Conference (2003), Sewanee Writers Conference (2004) and Diane Middlebrook Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin (1998-99). Her grants include a United States Artist Grant (2006), as well as two Fulbright grants for travel and research in Japan and Brazil (1995, 2009). In addition to her numerous accomplishments, she has given more than 100 readings over the past 10 years, as well as having frequently served as a writer in residence at a number of universities and colleges.

TOM FRANKLIN

Tom Franklin, from rural Alabama, has published three books, *Poachers: Stories* and novels *Hell at the Breech* and *Smonk*, all from William Morrow. Recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Franklin also has been the Philip Roth Resident in Creative Writing and the Tennessee Williams Resident at Sewanee. His work has appeared in *The Oxford American*, *New Stories From the South* and *Best American Mystery Stories of the Century*. He has won an Edgar Award, Mississippi Institute for Arts & Letters Award and Alabama Library Association Award. He teaches at Ole Miss and lives in Oxford, Miss.

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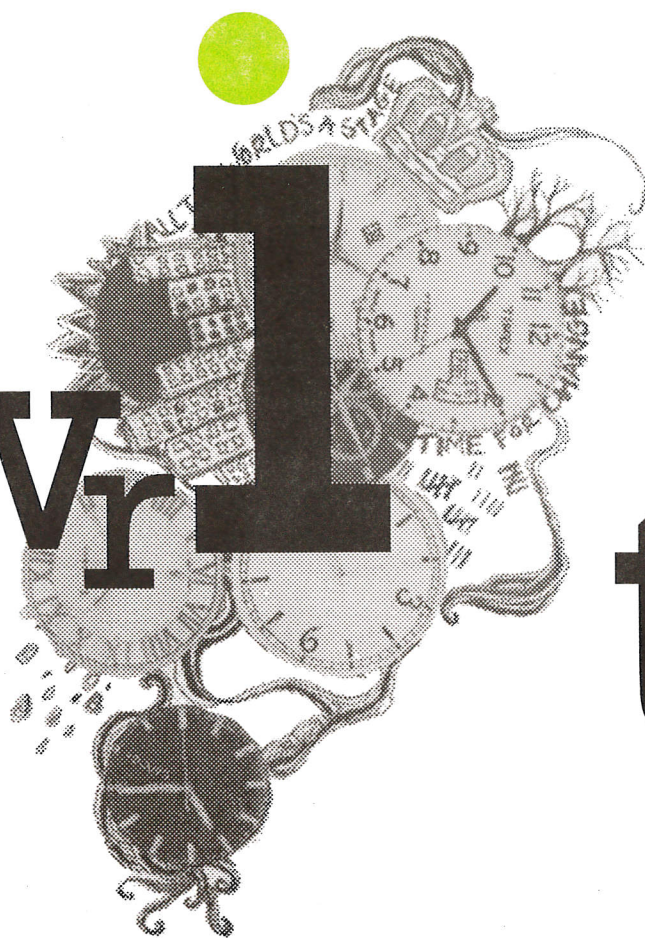
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awards





SURREALISTIC BREAKFAST

TODD RUNGE

POETRY: FIRST PLACE

What wild colors this painter has dipped his brush into! What an imaginative poem. I was thrilled to spend time getting a tour of this remarkable breakfast, "where paper whales soar / blowing yellow confetti over the oceans." Part Lewis Carroll, part Kafka, this poem displays a poet's mind cut loose from the shackles of everyday logic. But it's not merely escapist. The author of "surrealist breakfast" knows he indulges in the world of impossible images because "it's less painful to see the world / in a thousand different ways" than to see it as it actually is. Perhaps, but our world is better for having this poem in it. — Beth Ann Fennelly

a seed squeezed through a pore
is sown in the dirt
and a bowl of wheat spills out
to salt and peppered beaches,
while a giant red ball
the size of the moon
is thrown into the watercolor sky
where paper whales soar
blowing yellow confetti over the oceans,
here it is always eight twenty-three a.m.
and people eat napkins for breakfast
and smear their faces with egg yolk.

it's not hard and it's fairly entertaining
to imagine the world something it isn't,
which isn't to say something it could be,
just that it's less painful to see the world
in a thousand different ways
and not see it
even in one way
it actually is.

so I will go on to sleep sunny-side-up
and wipe the dreams off myself in the morning
and look through this mirror
where my image
disappears.

THE DANDELION

TARA BRITZ

POETRY: SECOND PLACE

The author of this poem finds a powerful symbol in the humble flower. She begins by placing the dandelion in the familiar domestic world where a droopy bouquet picked for mom now sits in "an old cracked coffee cup." It's a surprise to journey as far as we do in a poem that never leaves the dandelion behind. We find with delight that the poem can end with a bittersweet note, with the flower evoking the passage of time and leaving us wishing for wishes. At least one of our wishes was granted, though, as this poem was a pleasure to read. — Beth Ann Fennelly

They call it a weed,
but we know better.
The little yellow tufts of mane
battling the grass
make pretty bouquets for mom,
lovingly arranged,
sad little yellow crowns
drooping over the side
of an old cracked coffee cup
on the middle of the kitchen table.

Or wreaths to ornament wispy hair
in pretend ceremonies,
where Annie,
or Bethy,
or Susie
pledges her undying love
to Billy,

or Timmy,
or Johnny
under that old oak tree,
which is really a chapel,
and where the prim orchids,
or delicate roses,
or exotic gardenia
carried by Ann,
or Elizabeth,
or Susan
could not compare
to those whimsical warriors,
those vivacious vagabonds,
those ragamuffin reminders,
of youth.

An aureate bed.
Bitter to the tongue;
soft to the touch.

Plucking petals
that gild fingertips.
No stain could be sweeter.
So they say "Nothing gold can stay,"
and in the blink of an eye
blonde turns to white
just as day turns to night.
Golden-haired Cinderella
becomes the fairy godmother.

Whisper at her
to send downy messengers
meandering through the air
whose purpose is two-fold,
wishes
and more wishes.

STILL LIFE



TODD RUNGE

POETRY: ELEANOR MATHEWS AWARD

The Mathews Award has been given to the student who has been singled out by the SC4 English faculty for overall achievement in creative writing. Traditionally, students with works selected for inclusion in *Patterns* in multiple genres or over more than one year have earned this distinction. This year's winner, Todd Runge, has earned this year's award based on his award-winning work in poetry and fiction (see table of contents). It is also noteworthy that Todd's behind-the-scenes work was instrumental in the filming of Josh Riehl's locally produced film, "The Killers," the screenplay of which was printed in last year's edition of *Patterns*.

at night I noticed it
beside the curb,
a blurry mass
momentarily lit by
the head lamps
pulling into
the driveway,
all I did
was go inside.

in the morning
I went outside
into the winter sunlight;
shadows and
snow shine
slanted across the yard.

before a procession
of prurient plastic flamingos,
propelling wings
into the wind,
it lay there still
iced to the road:
it was a possum
and no longer playing.

my eyes, damp
in the bright cold,
could see,
sharpened in detail,
every hair
from elephant-lash

whisker,
down to its
fuzzy,
pink embarrassed tail.

it was dead
but I saw it still
full of life.

I knew it would soon
be plowed under and buried,
incubating
in a frosty sarcophagus,
only to thaw and be born
out of this slushy womb,
and bloat and blossom,
a spring ornament.

POP GOES

DON LIERMAN

POETRY: BLANCHE REDMAN AWARD

"Pop Goes" is aptly titled, because it's a poem full of surprises. It begins in a manner designed to unsettle the reader – where are we exactly in this strange and threatening landscape? But even without being able to take comfort in feeling firmly grounded, we can take pleasure in the description of the street punk's energy and language, such as when, in line five, we find "the spunk, the spunk, the hardened worm." The language play continues when we see our punk brought up against societal forces in stanza three; he is told, memorably, to "put the feeling back in your pants / And be the good ole' nice boy/ Who caboosed for long / the blue ball dance." The poem ends not with a whimper but with a bang. It's a sonic boom, and a fine piece of work. — Beth Ann Fennelly

Three generations within
Pity the God that lied to him
When the piercings do commence
The torture of the street punk charm
The spunk, the spunk, the hardened worm
Angelic whores atop the spires
Voyeur bitches with apple pies

Outside those once deceived
Knit baby boots with youngish yarn
Rank fast the savage of this cause
The one who raged against the storm

Know write it this way
Right it that
Put your feeling back in your pants
And be the good ole' nice boy
Who caboosed for long
the blue ball dance

Well time is ending
so is his charm
To play the fairy downy down
Pop one in the chamber for

what should be dug
and one for the leper upon your bus

Well stayed along another arm
The last one's for you big Cowboy God

SQUARED



KIRSTEN KRAMER

ESSAY: FIRST PLACE

A lovely, evocative essay on place, "Squared" manages to show Boston's Copley Square on a summer's evening without drifting into sentimentality. What I like best, though, is the narrator's slow change of mood, brought about by the events of the essay, a gathering band of musicians. At first our narrator is preoccupied with logistics, but, letting the gathering magic of the Square envelop her, she begins to enjoy the moment; and while this might not typically be considered a momentous epiphany, the essay is so clear in its descriptions, so pitch perfect in tone, that even such a small event achieves the level of poetry. — Tom Franklin

We needed batteries. The last night of my only vacation all summer long, and we had to get batteries. I, of course, couldn't stop my lips from curling downward in irritation. I wanted to run through the beautiful city streets of Boston and soak up every sight I possibly could. My eyes burned for one last look at the Charles River. My feet weren't ready to stop walking the Freedom Trail. My heart wasn't ready to go back home.

I was sulking as I always do when I know a trip is coming to an end, especially one I've anticipated for well over a year. The last thing I wanted to do was think about going home. But, nevertheless, we made our last minute preparations to board the plane home in the morning.

With new batteries in my camera, I futilely attempted to capture my fleeting memories of the city I had come to love in less than a week. We walked to the well-known Boston Public Library that was conveniently only a few blocks from our hotel. I took a few lousy pictures since I was already feeling the effects of time on a vacation. I was stuck in that horrible middle consciousness of not wanting to go home, but not wanting to stay any longer in the place I would soon have to leave, possibly to never see again.

Not to mention I had no desire to return to my solitary existence at home. Camp was a word I had learned to despise. My boyfriend had left for theatre camp for three weeks. We're extraordinarily close and we do everything together. We're best friends and living without him was a wretched experience. My face never warmed with a smile. At best I managed a smirk. The only thing that seemed to help was not being in the town where everything reminded me of him, and now that distraction was drawing to a close.

We wound up in Copley Square where the first day I had noticed the juxtaposition of the old and the new. A centuries-old church, falling apart with that brown crusty aged look, stood adjacent to a modern-day mile-high skyscraper. The skyscraper was built with windows of reflective glass in order to respect the city landscape around it. Perfectly mirrored in the skyscraper was the aged church. This juxtaposition had fascinated me the entire trip and I was intent on capturing it on film before I left.

While I was preoccupied with my amateur photography, my parents were aimlessly wandering around the square also taking in the last sights of the city. Traffic zipped around us noisily, yet

the square seemed peaceful. People were strolling, not moving with that quickened pace of busyness that so many of us walk with. Birds were circling above finding refuge in the few trees in the center of the square. Children ran, jumped and played around the sculptures and gardens. Parents chased them, but not without being in awe of the innocence of youth that lay before them. All the while, a humble group of musicians were gathering in the square.

At first, a violinist took out her instrument and left her opened case on the ground. I took notice, but only to make a snap judgment about how many beggar musicians there are in large cities. But the violinist was not alone. She was soon joined by a pudgy middle aged man with a genial expression. He had a microphone and two large black speakers on tall metal stands. Another woman joined with a small keyboard. At this point, I stopped my picture taking and joined my parents in watching this spectacle forming in front of us.

People started to congregate around these musicians. I suddenly felt the one looked down upon. These people were not pitiable musicians, but the grand directors of a lavish summer show. All types of people started to gather: old men with their timid wives, young couples simply walking by, families with small children, affluent businessmen, and many others. We still had no idea what was going to occur, but we couldn't have left our observations if we tried. We had been caught up in the spontaneity of the city and were thrilled.

"Everybody gather 'round! Let's start tonight with something easy to warm up!"

Everyone started listening to this man with the microphone. Those in the near vicinity and others across the square accepted his invitation to join. And then it began. The music swelled and filled the city block with beautiful sounds. The musicians were talented and the reverberations bounced off the nearby buildings to surround us all. All were invited and all were treated with genuine love and respect. Those who knew the steps well helped those who didn't. Children joined in and were accepted with loving, open arms from even the eldest in the group. Profound joy emanated from this group of strangers which caused passers-by to stop and watch awhile.

We stood watching this spectacle for at least a half an hour, but it seemed like a second. We watched the interactions of these strangers and I couldn't help but imagine this same event occurring in Port Huron. I had to stop myself from laughing out loud, but then my face convulsed, holding back a tear. I doubted if I would ever see this much love between a group of strangers again.

"People are so caught up with themselves. People at home love their traditions. They love the tradition of being alone."

I thought this and was deeply saddened. Without knowing it, I had lost my innocence and gained the same attitude held by a majority of people in the town in which I live. I keep to myself. I don't talk to my neighbors. I barely even muster a smile for my friends I meet in the hallway. Yet, here in the middle of a city nearly twenty times larger than Port Huron, this group of strangers had met and simply enjoyed the company of other human beings. This to me was breathtaking.

Soon thereafter my parents decided it was time we move on and continue finishing up our last-minute souvenir shopping. I had no desire to move from my spot. I was at peace simply watching this magical event before me. Sadly, my previous anxieties returned. I started to feel anxious about the trip home, my return to solitude and my lack of quality pictures. Nevertheless, I turned from my spot and continued the walk back to the hotel and eventually home.

But I couldn't shake the vivid memories of the event that had just transpired and was still occurring. I stopped in my tracks. I hesitated to take another step. I felt as if I had bought tickets to the Olympics and had left half-way through the opening ceremonies. I couldn't go any farther. I watched as my parents continued walking ahead of me. My thoughts were dizzying me. I knew if we didn't turn back I'd forever regret not joining in the enchantment that had been less than an arm's length away.

"Stop! We need to go back!"

We turned around and walked swiftly back to join in the last two numbers. My father joined me while my mother took my place as photographer. We were, just like the others, accepted





with open, loving arms. I was a typical tacky tourist, wearing a sweatshirt screaming the name of the town I was in. My father was the typical businessman, having just come from the last of his meetings. We were accepted nonetheless. Somehow merely watching the love and acceptance around us wasn't enough to fully understand what was happening. Once we joined in, we understood. It didn't matter that we were from half the country away, or that we didn't know what we were doing. We were there to laugh and love, and we were accepted.

The last night of our trip to Boston turned completely around. We started out the night dreading the morning ahead. We were dreading the crowded airport and the long ride home. Yet we were caught up in the event before us. We were swept up in the awesome sense of community that transpired in the busy bustling Boston city streets. Never again will I let a remarkable opportunity almost pass me by. I not only witnessed, but participated in the euphoria of Copley Square on a summer evening.

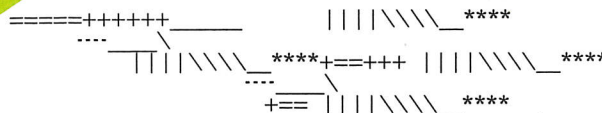
My t-shirt design reads, "I square danced in Copley Square!"

MY T-SHIRT DESIGN
READS, "I SQUARE
DANCED IN
COPLEY SQUARE"

WAKE UP TIME

CHARLES JOHNSON

ESSAY: SECOND PLACE



Like an eager cop, this essay snatches you by the collar and bangs you up against a wall. You're there, with Charlie, in jail. When he recognizes the oddity of there being a phone in the detention room with him, you realize that he's been here, jail, before. Such details give this gritty piece its authority, this writer his street cred. While the early paragraphs of the essay are humorous, the ending is not: a dead phone line and the realization that this behavior will go on. It's ultimately a chilling piece, admirable in its honesty. — Tom Franklin

My skin feels damp and cold, and all I can smell is urine and bologna. The burn in my throat and the taste in my mouth tell me I vomited, but don't remember it. The ridges of my fingertip slide across the four-letter words trenched in the wooden bench that's now frozen to my thighs. I wonder how the others carved their profane thoughts, because all my possessions have been confiscated. I don't even have pockets in the faded-blue cotton outfit I was given; all I have is a bracelet with my name and a picture I don't remember taking.

I wobble to a stance. I've never felt so weak. I vaguely remember being on the stained concrete floor, back against the wall, underneath the bench. That was when the others were here. I wanted to roll over, and put my face against the wall because the smell of paint would surely be better, but even in a drunken stupor I knew better then to have my backside pointed in an unguarded direction.

Now up and slightly coherent, I realize the situation I'm in, and how quickly it needs to change. I slam my fists on the paint-chipped steel door, but there is no one in sight. In the other corner of the room is a phone, which is strange. I've been in this situation

before, and phones were a privilege, not there for anyone's daily gossip. The receiver of the phone is slathered with oily hand grease, and usually my germ phobia deters me from using pay phones. This time I'm not as concerned with hand sanitizer as I am in getting out, and this disgusting phone is my key, my portal. The steel cord is half ripped out, and some of the buttons stick — I'd rather not know what grime lurked in the crevices of the keys. I hear a screeching tone, followed by "Please check the number and try again." Must be for local calls only. The steel-enforced glass window next to the phone has a list of phone numbers held up by just a few tattered pieces of struggling tape. Bondsmen. Great. My mother isn't even going to hear my voice first, but the deep raspy voice of a crooked stranger. I've seen a million billboards for "King" Stahlman Bail Bonds, but they are just as cheesy as Call Sam commercials. I hunt for a legit sounding name — someone who doesn't have a reality TV series on A&E, and try a few. No answers. I try every single number on the list of about thirty-five names, and no answers. So back to the "King," actually holding my breath in fear of an answer.

"King Stahlman Bonds, what's the charge?"

Dear God, I have no idea... How can I not know why I'm here?

"I'm not sure sir, I just need to get out."

"Sure thing kid, who's got the money?"

Hell, now I'm toast. Now it's all over. Now mom and dad will be called. My stomach is so far up my throat that I can't remember what hunger ever felt like. "My parents. 810-531-1212. Do we have to do this now?"

"We don't have to do this at all kid. It's your life."

This is my life. Everything I've ever learned, everything I've ever experienced, and it all boils down to this.

"Make the call."

I'm on hold. I feel a sweat drop on my forehead, and wonder how that's possible with the air conditioning set to arctic. I only felt the droplet because the vein that was throbbing between my eyebrows jarred it loose. My eyes well up, and now everything is bright, white, and foggy, like my next vision should be St. Peter. I should be so lucky. I hear a crack from the cartilage in my ear pressed hard against the receiver. Then I see nothing, smell nothing, and feel nothing. A tiny click on the speaker pierces the loud tone of silence I've meditated in defense, sending a mountain-moving thump through my chest. The voice of nurture, discipline, aid, scolding, brighter days, and now deathly concern...

"Charlie?"

The tears are free falling now. I glance up and notice a wall clock through the window for the first time. 3am. I use my fingers to count out what time it would be in Michigan. At 6am my father hasn't even left for work yet, and I wonder if he is sitting up listening or still counting sheep. He will soon be alerted to my location — again. I can't help but think that my mother has made a habit of taking the phone with her to bed every night just in case her son calls for another bailout. This is the first time I can't say why I'm calling though, and the tears are in part caused by fear, but also more guilt than ever. I wasn't sure I was even capable of a conscience until this moment. I'd honestly rather be dead than on

the phone with my already weeping mother. I haven't said a word and she already knows what is in store, mouthing quick silent prayers begging to be wrong.

My voice cracks, "Mom..."

"What's going on Charlie?" The worry in her voice is thick, and the lack of anger stabs through my chest plate.

"I don't know yet Mom, I was hoping the bondsman would know." I said.

He jumps in with "They will tell you soon enough. I just need bond information from whoever is paying it."

My mom interjects, "That'll be me..."

"Okay, we will get a hold of the jail to find out the amount of bail and call you back. Say bye to your son for now."

She rolls into a balling cry and tries to say something, but it's not working. Then after a few seconds a click, and she's gone.

Why didn't I say anything? Why didn't I tell her how sorry I was or how much I loved her? I slowly hang the receiver on its metal perch, and spin my back to the wall, sliding down until I'm tucked in the fetal position, hoping that she will feel me at my most vulnerable, twenty-five hundred miles away. Then whatever supreme being exists, whom I now despise as much as myself, takes mercy, and pulls me into the safety of sleep. I slip into a dream of another Charlie; a Charlie that doesn't drink until a blackout lands himself in jail. A Charlie that doesn't drive his parents to sleeping pills to keep the demons away at bedtime, terrified of the next phone ring. But even in my dream, I know better: I know that I won't change anytime soon, and this is my life, the life of a screw up. Rolling in the filth of the floor, I become engaged with my destiny, and a sick serenity floods my nightmare.

SCENES FROM A HORROR MOVIE

ANDREW GORZEN =====_____^^)) _-_-

ESSAY: KATHY NICKERSON AWARD

The unusual structure of this piece is only part of its effectiveness – ten sections, some as short as a sentence, some as long as a page. But what I like best about this short essay is how it pulls you in, snippets of “horror” in real life, or places where “horror” could occur, but most of the time does not, settling instead for banality or even comedy. It’s at the end of this piece, though, when horror does intrude, when the essay changes tone and leaves its reader dazed and moved. Horror in life is like that, not where you expect it, or where it ought to fit. It appears without warning and leaves us devastated. — Tom Franklin

ONE

It’s the summer after my first year of college. My mother and I are driving back from my grandparents’ house when it occurs to her that we need milk at home. She stops at a gas station and tells me to run in. I get out of the car and in front of me is a woman looking up at the faintly glowing Mobil sign. I look too, and there are spiders crawling all over the letters.

“Look at all those spiders,” she says. “I hate spiders.”

I walk into the store and grab the milk, and the woman outside has taken her place behind the counter. I now notice the dark rings around her eyes and her disheveled brown hair.

“Did you know that you’re always within five feet of a spider?” she says. “And you eat five of them every year... I hate spiders...”

I pay for the milk and walk out, about to laugh. This is like a scene in a horror movie, I think. The part where the girl warns everyone of the impending spider invasion, but nobody believes her. I get in the car and tell my mother the story.

TWO

At age four I have a dream. I’m in a dentist chair yelling, “NOOOO!!!” when the “doctor,” who seems like an associate of both Freddy Krueger and the Nazi Party, stamps me in the knee. The dream lasts two seconds; I wake up, and for the first time I notice a scar on my knee. My parents tell me I have had the scar since age two.

THREE

My sister Alicia and I, each of us well into college, are at the grocery store, walking down the bargain aisle. Something catches my sister’s eye: it’s a figurine of a cow, standing on its hind legs, its front hooves spread like the arms of Jesus Christ. The cow is wearing a tight gray suit and a black robe, and holds a giant scepter in one hoof. The look in its eyes is focused and intent.

“What the hell is this?” Alicia says.

“It looks like a... sorcerer cow,” I say. “It looks like something out of *Are You Afraid of the Dark*. I can imagine us buying it, then it grows to eight feet tall and goes on a killing spree.”

"Let's buy it," Alicia says.

"Okay," I say.

FOUR

Are You Afraid of the Dark was constantly showing on television when I was a kid. Every chance I got I would love to witness its re-enactments of campfire ghost stories, but I avoided one episode at all costs. It concerned a girl who summoned an ugly zombie that lurked between her walls, and every time I watched it, the zombie's pale moldy face and brown robe would appear in my dreams for the next few nights. I imagined it chasing me through my house at night and appearing out of the darkness in my backyard.

Almost ten years later, I found the episode again; the ghoul's makeup job was just as gruesome, but he was not so intimidating. I remembered him grabbing the kids and attacking them, but that didn't even happen. He was more or less a lumbering buffoon, and even if the kids had not succeeded in trapping his soul in their silver necklace, I think I'd still be able to sleep at night.

FIVE

There was a three-month period where anybody we knew who had some sort of celebration got a special gift: a sorcerer cow. Hey, they were only a dollar and fifty cents each.

SIX

It's my sophomore year of high school. I am at a party when a few of my friends decide to show us some footage they shot around town. At one part they are in the old St. Clair Middle School and my friend Bobby is giving a tour of the basement. In the tape we see the "Fallout Shelter" sign that seems to suggest the impending end of civilization. Then Bobby walks down the stairs and into a small room with grimy green walls. There's a pair of yellow rain boots on the floor that somehow make the place even creepier, perhaps because they are only to be worn while trudging through the sludge left by the nuclear apocalypse (when that happens).

Bobby goes through a door and enters a giant furnace room. The machines in there are so loud that they seem designed to drown out screams of terror. There are only a few lights in the room, which are only there to make you realize how ugly the room is. The windows are covered in dirt, blocking out all sunlight and optimistic thoughts.

At one point Bobby finds another door with a glass window in it. On that window is a dusty handprint, which is the most horrifying thing they find down there. I imagine somebody smacking their hand into that door as they desperately tried to grab that doorknob, but couldn't because they were being eaten up by some mutated monster that was created through some sort of atomic disaster during the Cold War.

I made a few trips into that basement, but I never wanted to go much further than the first room. Somebody who worked there might have found me down there, and I didn't want to get in trouble.

SEVEN

My siblings and I are being baby-sat one night. Alicia goes out to the garage to get something, and runs back to the living room screaming. I'm thinking there's a monster in the garage; she just saw a raccoon. Man, did she over-react.

EIGHT

We're all being baby-sat again, this time with less successful results.

We are in the living room watching television. This time it's my brother Alex I hear screaming, and when I look at him, I see a thin line of blood aggressively squirting out of his left wrist.

I don't know what's going on, but my sister grabs a wash cloth and grasps onto my brother's wrist with all the force she can muster. The baby-sitter calls 911, and when the ambulance gets there, Alicia and I are shuffled over to a neighbor's house. We're forced to wait there.

Alex got stitches and was okay; he just had to let the hand rest for a while. I always imagined that his artery had just opened itself, but the real culprit was a plate that had been left on the floor. He had tripped, and when he fell, his hand hit the plate and shattered it.

NINE

My sister wakes me up one morning. "Drew, can you help me with something?" she asks, and then tells me we need to clean off Mom's car. "Just so you know, Mom was on the phone with Grandpa earlier and she started crying. I don't know why yet, but it's something bad, I can tell."

We go out to our driveway. Mom's car is in the carport, and messages like "Congratulations Drew!" and "Class of 2006" are written on it from my high school commencement the week before. Alicia and I start scrubbing it away, and I can feel the shift between celebration and mourning. I become almost positive that Grandpa had called Mom to inform her that his wife had passed away, that my mother had lost her mother. I keep washing the car, trying to get the marker off as quickly as possible so I can go inside and find out what's going on.

When we're done, we go inside and find Mom; as expected, she's crying.

"Corey's son—Charlie—fell last night—he's in the hospital—he's in a coma—"

I start crying too.

We get in Mom's car and drive to the hospital in Mt. Clemens. We find our whole family in the waiting room. My Aunt Julie, my cousins Cheryl and Jeremy—all three are deteriorated and have tears in their eyes.

We wait a while before we can see him. When we are allowed into his room, we find a machine doing his breathing for him. At the age of twenty-one, he still looks like he would be able to leap out of the bed and go back to his daily routines.

My father, my mother, my brother, my sister and I stand around Charlie, not saying anything. I witness my dad crying for the first (and, so far, only) time. We returned to the waiting room, and about half an hour later, a doctor came and told Aunt Julie that her son had died.

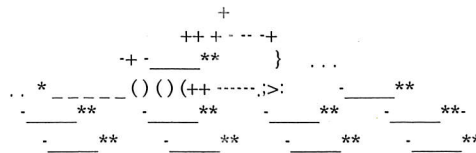
I knew a kid in middle school who, right before high school started, got hit by a car and died. Someone from my high school gym class had died in a car accident. The former principal at my middle school had died of cancer. But when Charlie suffered his brain aneurysm, he became the first member of my family whose death I had lived through. It set the precedent for every death that I would experience from there on out; I would always feel that whoever had died, I did not know well enough.

TEN

My siblings and I are showing a few friends the new house our parents have bought. We walk up the stairs when a bat dives at us. Most of us practically fall down out of fright and the bat flies down to the basement. My sister grabs a tennis racket, which is kept in the hallway for just this occasion, and follows the bat downstairs. I go down the stairs and see my sister flailing the racket, looking like she is actually playing tennis. After a few swings, I hear a giant SMACK! The bat is dead, and at this point Alicia is exhausted.

We moved in and bats continued to appear from time to time. If a bat appeared in a certain part of the hallway, I would always look for one when I walked through there. Pretty soon my family switched from tennis rackets to nets, opting to let them outside instead of killing them. I'm still no good at confronting the bats, but there's some comfort to go with it. After all the ugly zombies, the creepy old basements with mutated monsters, and the sadists who give me scars in my dream, it's nice to be afraid of things that can actually appear.

HARD LESSON



MICHAEL SMITH

STORY: FIRST PLACE

Grounded in the very real (and earthy) settings of a bathroom and a break room, this hilarious little story is a brilliant snapshot of a contemporary blue-collar American workplace. From the bawdy bathroom scribbles and “art,” to the pitch-perfect dialogue of the characters, this one-scene story elevates itself to satire as its “king,” Lou, the foreman, dispenses his form of justice to his subjects, the workers. The firing of Dave, the point-of-view character, with his worrisome home life, is disturbing; more disturbing is how the story forgets Dave as soon as he’s gone, and focuses on those still there. — Tom Franklin

Dave usually preferred to use company time to pursue his current activity. He sat there surrounded by the names of coworkers, past and present, followed by unflattering accusations of their sexuality and the occasional phone number. He would usually sit and read the limericks he already knew by heart or pen one himself if inspiration struck, but today it was the new stall door that had his attention. It had been replaced last week after somebody had smashed the old one into small particle board chunks, and already the blank canvas had been filled with a nice drawing of the plant manager. Whoever the artist was had portrayed him as a king, wearing only a robe and a crown, and holding a grossly oversized penis pissing on a faceless crowd.

Nice use of a highlighter, he thought, dragging his arm across his forehead to stop the sweat from burning his eyes; he finished up then flushed the toilet with his foot. He took one more look at the caricature on the stall door as he buttoned up his pants. He shook his head, grinning. Who says stall art is a dying medium, he thought, wondering who the artist might be. He washed his hands then kicked open the bathroom door on his way to the break room.

The air conditioning blasted across his sweat-soaked body as he

opened the break room door. He saw his coworkers scattered, some in groups and some alone, shoveling their lunches in their mouths as fast as they could so that they might enjoy a few minutes’ respite from the line. He found Dan sitting across from the new guy at the corner table, closest to the vending machines, with a steaming foot long chili dog from the spinning E. coli-express in front of him. He walked into their conversation.

“...so don’t drop down to zero or they’ll boot your ass out of here just like that,” Dan said, snapping his fingers.

“What if I’m sick or in the hospital? What if I’m in a car wreck? Would they take that into consideration?” The new guy said.

“Oh yeah, sure they would. They’ll even send you flowers,” Dan said looking up at Dave, both of them having a good laugh at the new guy’s expense.

“Ain’t you ever worked in a factory before, Rookie?” Dave said.

“No,” he said.

"Well, what do you think so far?" Dave said.

"It's not that bad. The work's pretty easy, the people seem alright," he said.

"Give it a while you'll love to hate it just like the rest of us," Dave said.

"Fucking right, listen up, Rookie. If you're going to last more than a week in this place you have to obey the two golden rules. First off, don't volunteer for anything. You might be tempted, you might think you have some bright fucking idea to improve work conditions or save the company a buck. Just keep your mouth shut. If you volunteer for anything around here, you might as well be volunteering to get ass raped by a herd of elephants. Anytime they "improve work conditions" it just makes our job harder, and they only way they are interested in saving money is by firing people. Like the guy you're replacing, Jim, motherfucker worked here for twenty years, was always on time, he only missed a couple a days since I've been here."

"Yeah, and he had his tongue so far up managements' ass he could lick their lips for them," Dave interrupted.

"Oh, he was an asshole. There's no denying that, but the point is even with all his dedication and relentless ass kissing they still fired his ass. And you know what for, Rookie?" Dan asked.

"I don't know, he gave them hemorrhoids," the Rookie said.

"Ha! I like that you're going to work out just fine. But, no they fired him for farting," Dan said.

"What?" the Rookie said.

"I shit you not, they fired that asshole for farting. He ate a bad burrito or something, and he had one nasty rotten ass. I know, I had to work next to him that day, I thought I was going to puke. Anyway, he was relieving the line at break and that fat, crusty haired, piece of shit, Lou, our piss poor excuse for a plant manager, happens to walk through Jim's ass cloud during his hourly circle of the shop. He gets a mouthful of Jim's rotten guts and fires him on the spot, he was relieving the line when I got back from break

and it's a good thing I got back on time or I would have been right behind him," Dan said.

"C'mon man you're messing with me. You can't fire somebody for farting."

"Wanna bet? Stick around you'll find out. Anyhow, that brings us to rule number two: keep your head down and your mouth shut. The less those assholes up front see you or hear your name the safer you are. You're better off just standing, hunched over your machine, diligently working away, or if you're as good as me acting like you're working. Stay under the radar and you chances of survival go up," Dan said.

Dave was staring into the vending machine hunting for his lunch, listening to Dan rant to the Rookie. He finally decided on a dollar bag of pretzels, but he only had seventy-five cents. He turned to Dan:

"Hey, man, you got a quarter I can borrow till Friday?"

"Dude, it's only Tuesday. What did mom tell you about spending all your money on hookers?" Dan said.

"Shut up, dick, you know all my money goes to doctor bills, and I had to take Jess in for her eighth month check up Friday," Dave said.

"Fine here. Shit, where are my manners? Rookie, this broke ass son of bitch right here is my brother, Dave."

"How's it going?" Dave asked, nodding his head at the Rookie.

"Pretty good," the Rookie responded, nodding back.

"Hey, don't let me stop you two from making out," Dan said.

They both answered him with long grins and middle fingers.

"How's Jess doing man? Last time I was over she was looking pretty huge. She should be shitting that kid out any day now. You know, Rookie, my brother might be a broke bastard, who can't keep his dick in his pants and is on a first name basis with every five-





dollar whore in the state, but I gotta say it was mighty good of him to step up and raise my kid for me," Dan said.

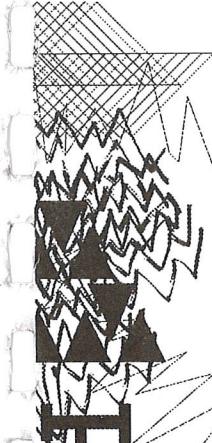
"Yeah, I might be worried if you didn't spend your nights manning the glory hole down at Bonehawks," Dave said as he clunked the quarters into the machine.

Dan responded by staring at the Rookie and stuffing the chili dog in his mouth, devouring it in two bites.



Dave pressed FU3 and watched the chrome spiral spin, pushing the bag forward and stop. The bag hung by its corner, snagged on the chips next to it. "Son of a bitch," Dave sighed to himself. He grabbed the top of the machine and began rocking it back and forth; there was no way this piece of shit was going to rob him of his last dollar. The break room filled with the protesting sounds of the machine as he pushed and panted, but the bag refused to budge, and he refused to stop.

"What do you think you're doing?" The voice said from behind him.



Dave stopped immediately. "Shit," he said under his breath. He turned around and saw Lou standing there glaring at him. "I was just trying to get my lunch out of the machine," he said.

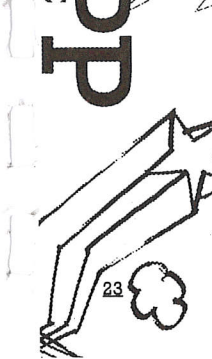
"Oh really, it looked more like you were damaging company property to me," Lou said.

"C'mon you guys don't even..." Dave said.

"Shut up. I don't want to hear your excuses. You're fired, get out of here," Lou said.

"But...I just...it didn't..." Dave began.

"Hey, what did I just say? Now are you going to leave or am I going to have to call the police?" Lou said, staring, past Dave, at the vending machine.



Dave stormed passed him silently and slammed the door on his way out. The walls shook, vibrating through the vending machine and dislodging the pretzel bag dropping it to the bottom. Dan and the Rookie stared at Lou as he walked over to the machine. A yellow highlighter fell out of his shirt pocket as he

bent down to retrieve the pretzels. He scooped it up and turned toward them. Both of their eyes quickly darting away from him as he stood up.

"What are you two looking at? Break's over— get back to work," he said as he opened the bag.

On their way back to the line Dan turned to the Rookie and said:

"Now you know why motherfuckers show up to work with assault rifles,"

"Fucking right," the Rookie said.

CONFESSIONS OF A COAT CLOSET

AMANDA MCRAE ==++++-____*)_____*)))))_____*****_____*))_____==++++-

STORY: SECOND PLACE

"Confessions of a Coat Closet" is a story both disturbing and fascinating; it's a piece in which we must remember to not associate the author with his/her character, a brave decision by the writer, choosing such an unsavory narrator. "Confessions" is also an excellent example of an unreliable narrator, and the setting – a psychiatrist's office – calls even further into question the narrator's "confessions." Is he guilty of the things he's confessing, or is he making them up? By the time we figure it out, it might just be too late. — Tom Franklin

It's because of her I'm here, because of her sweet breath and soft brunette hair that I'm restrained and broken. It was her green eyes. It was her soft olive skin that shivered ever so slightly when I spoke to her. It was her and her alone.

The day we met was an ordinary spring day that I'll remember until I'm in my grave. She was running through Central Park as she did every day, though I had never seen her before, her hair blowing and chest pounding. I was sitting on my usual Wednesday bench when she flew past me with such gracefulness I thought she had wings to guide her. She had her hair thrown into a ponytail with ear phones blaring. I couldn't make out the words but I'd hoped it wasn't Britney Spears; of course it wouldn't be, she was much too classic for such nonsense. She rounded the curve and avoided the other runners with a confident stride. She didn't even notice several male, good looking male joggers, taking a second look as she flew past them. Her focus never left her stride and I found myself hurt that she didn't notice me gawking. No one ever noticed me and that was how I liked it. It made my job so much easier, but I was immediately disappointed. How could she not be feeling the emotions that I felt rushing over me? Surely my heart was pounding loud enough for her to hear over her music. The signals I was sending out alone should have stopped her in

her tracks and sent her in my direction with arms open ready to start our new life together. I watched until she was out of sight she never looked back and I was still alone on my Wednesday bench with only the newspaper to comfort me. I began to wonder immediately why I'd never come across this perfect running woman before? I'd sat on this same bench every Wednesday morning for two years, with the exception of maybe three days, I'd been looking for her every time, why now? I'd finally found the woman I'd been searching for, the woman I was trying to fill the void with, the woman that made all of the others practice. Practice of restraint. I would practice restraint, I would have to in order to keep her.

I sauntered down the stairs into the subway station with a sensation of longing and trepidation that only a truly lonely heart could feel. I sighed with sheer disgust when I realized I would be sitting next to a boisterous snot nosed kid and his insatiable mother talking on her cell phone not realizing that her mutant child had his hand up his nose digging for miles into his nasal cavity. The next events happened so quickly it took me a few moments to process them. First the spawn of the devil pulled out a grotesque blood covered wad from his nose and before he put his prize in his mouth I was running to the opposite end of the car to

avoid such a dramatic scene. The car was standing room only so I nestled in between a very large sweaty man with a hard hat and the window. The car was packed, much like it is every afternoon in this city, so instead of making eye contact with anyone I began reading the advertisements surrounding the car. I wasn't interested in male enhancement drugs, but the sweaty man beside me was jotting down the number, I guess whatever works. There was a bright neon sign advertising for the newest techno dance club on the East side, no thanks. But then something happened, a woman shifted in her seat revealing something. It was my running woman staring me in the face with a wide smile. Being this close I could now see her features were more perfect than they had been in the park. A perfectly proportioned nose to mouth to ear ratio, with white teeth and a wispy bang, she was perfect. It took me only a second to realize that this wasn't my soul mate in the flesh but an advertisement explaining exactly where the Dr's office was located. BINGO!

I made it home to my dreadful apartment in the middle of China town in record time, winding in and out of fruit stands and delivery boys with a precision that was necessary if you wanted to make it through this block alive. Once inside the safety of my one bedroom dive, I made an appointment with Dr. Patricia Kingdon for the following afternoon. I had never considered visiting a shrink before, but I figured that being analyzed wasn't the worst thing that could happen. The fear of her knowing who I really was haunted me. Would I frighten her with my malicious past? Could she see past my contemptible addiction and love me despite it all? After hanging up the phone I decided I needed to relax and get my thoughts straight. I flung myself onto the couch and picked up my most recent journal from the coffee table. I recorded my day's events and devoted two pages to Patricia. I described her hair blowing in the wind and her legs that went on for hours. Each perfect detail went into my journal with a small sketch to close the entry. I knew Patricia had to be different from the others, and I promised myself that she would be the one. I placed the journal on its shelf with the others I had filled over the years with accomplishments, and spent the rest of the night daydreaming about my new love.

After a sleepless night I concluded Patricia could love me for me. True love, like Romeo and Juliet, has conquered more than the slight injustices I'd committed. I approached her office earlier than I had expected. I was too anxious to sleep that morning and had awakened at an untimely hour and completed my morning routine in record time. As I meandered in front of the beautiful brownstone,

I replayed in my head how this was going to go. I would start off by being nonchalant in case she wanted to play games, if not I would take her in my arms immediately and run off into the sunset. Either way worked for me, but I preferred the latter.

"I'm here to see Dr. Kingdon." I replied to the little blonde receptionist behind the counter who was snapping her gum.

"Take a seat, anywhere you want. She'll be a few minutes." She never once glanced up to see my face but kept her nose tightly tucked into the latest celebrity gossip magazine. She looked like the kind of person to get swept up into all the Hollywood drama, I remember thinking. An eternity passed and she finally emerged from her office. Patricia Kingdon. Her name was perfect, as if I had picked it myself.

"Adrian?" Her voice was like a song, she was singing my name and I was frozen and lost in her voice all at once.

"Adrian? Lexi did Adrian check in yet?" Before the ditz behind the counter could answer I was standing and lunging across the waiting room. A smile rippled across her face and she reached for my hand.

"Adrian, I'm Dr. Kingdon. Are you ready to start?" she sang, as she guided me into her office. I say office but it was more like a magazine cover for house and home. I assumed it was to make all the crazy people feel comfortable and ready to pour out their deepest regrets and cry into the five thousand dollar couch. At this point I became boldly aware that I hadn't said anything up till that point and that my first impression was being wasted, and so was my hundred dollars an hour.

"You've got a real nice set up here." Idiot. "I mean, this is a great area, rent must be pretty steep." I knew what I was saying was idiotic and what the hell did I care what she paid in rent? My nerves were getting the best of me which scared me more than the therapy.

"Why don't you take a seat and we'll get started." She smiled as if everyone reacted as foolishly and pulled up a large comfortable red suede chair that engulfed her and made her look like a child sitting in her father's chair. My heart pounded. She suggested we get started right away and explained the procedure to me. Everything was in confidence, nothing I said could be repeated and she wasn't passing judgment on anything that was said. That appealed to me

greatly considering I was about to pour my heart out to this woman. Thinking back now I can't believe I was so naive.

"When I was twenty seven I raped a college girl." I revealed in a tone that a normal person would have used to explain their going to the grocery store. I needed to start this relationship off right, no secrets. This caught her off guard and I could tell by the way she shifted in her chair and wrinkled her brow that she had gotten more than she bargained for, she had no idea.

"Well. Ok. Why don't you tell me about that." She was visibly uncomfortable and I wanted to stop and tell her it was a lie, tell her I wasn't a monster. But this stupid room with the flowers and the pottery barn table made me want to be honest and her eyes, they wanted the truth no matter how it made her feel.

I began talking more quickly, as if my mouth was refusing to listen to my brain. My head was screaming to stop and to try to explain it all away. The girl had wanted it and then at the last minute said no, she was dressed provocatively. None of these excuses made it out of my mouth, the only thing I could do was tell the truth. "The first girl, which I am forced to refer to her as because I have no idea what her name was,"

"The first girl?" emerged with a gulp from her sweet rose colored lips.

"Yes the first. I had noticed her shopping in my grocery store and began following her. It happened in the woods behind the university." Pause, breathe. "When I was finished I let her run away. I felt the most exuberant adrenaline rush of my life and couldn't sleep for two days straight because of the fear of coming down from my high." Christ, I didn't mean to mention that last bit. A small gasp came from Patricia, but she covered it up with a cough. "Why have you decided to come out with this information now?"

I was so glad she asked me this question. It was time to redeem myself.

"I've changed. I don't want to be a monster anymore and I've found the woman of my dreams and she is the reason I want to become a better person." It was a bit too early to explain that that person was her.

"I'm not a priest I'm a psychiatrist. I'm not here to take your confession." She sounded frightened with a side of annoyance.

"I'm not here to confess," or was I? "I'm here to get help for my ... addiction." I felt that was the most appropriate word I could use.

"Oh. Well, then continue." She looked down at her yellow pad to make a note. I was silent. Until she looked up "How was your childhood?" She seemed embarrassed at her previous assumption as red flushed across her cheeks. It made her even more beautiful.

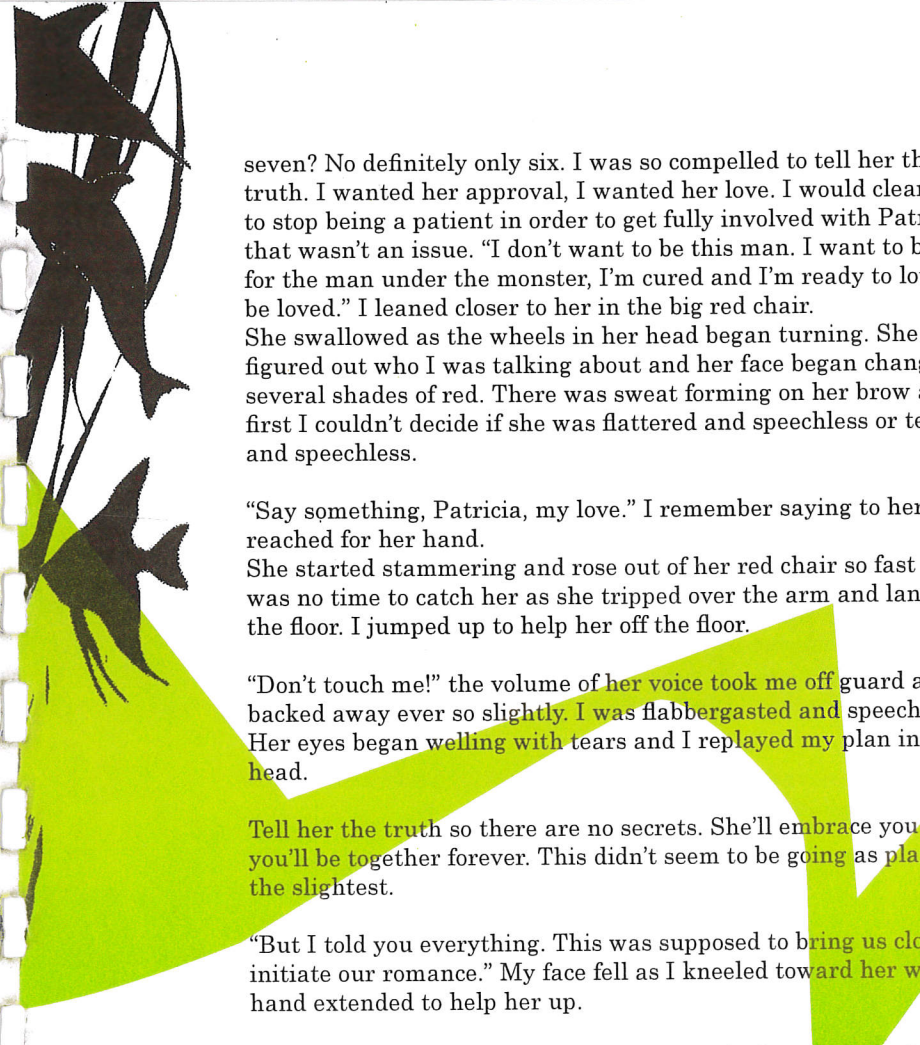
"My parents were middle class. My father worked and my mother stayed home with me. It was an incredibly normal upbringing." I left out that my father despised me because I didn't play sports or have girlfriends in high school. "My mother committed suicide when I was thirteen and my father started drinking pretty heavily after that. I lost touch with him when I moved away to college." I could feel her questions brewing.

"How did your mothers suicide affect you?"

"I rape and kill women. I think it affected me quite negatively." Shit. I opened a flood gate and there was no way to close it now. "You rape and kill women?" she began shifting in her chair. "I think we need to ..." she trailed off, so I quickly jumped in to redeem myself.

"I've only been trying to find the one person that makes my life worth living the person that gives me the strength to love and to be loved. The woman that can look me in the eye and say what I've done doesn't matter to her because I'm the one she loves. And I've found her." I was sitting on the edge of my seat, pleading with her to believe me. Why shouldn't she? It was the truth, a truth I was unaware of until yesterday. I wanted someone to love me. My father hadn't, and my mother couldn't have or else she wouldn't have left me. I was invisible in high school and college proved to be the worst days of my life instead of the best. A girl had never given me a second glance unless it was in fear when I was on top of her with her life in my hands. I had never known a love that wasn't forced. "Why..." it was barely a whisper and she trailed off. Her eyes were wide and she hadn't written a single word on her yellow pad. "How many women?" She squeaks out from behind her bang that has fallen into her eyes.

"A few. It doesn't matter. Maybe six," I think it's six, or was it



seven? No definitely only six. I was so compelled to tell her the truth. I wanted her approval, I wanted her love. I would clearly have to stop being a patient in order to get fully involved with Patricia, that wasn't an issue. "I don't want to be this man. I want to be loved for the man under the monster, I'm cured and I'm ready to love and be loved." I leaned closer to her in the big red chair. She swallowed as the wheels in her head began turning. She had figured out who I was talking about and her face began changing several shades of red. There was sweat forming on her brow and at first I couldn't decide if she was flattered and speechless or terrified and speechless.

"Say something, Patricia, my love." I remember saying to her as I reached for her hand. She started stammering and rose out of her red chair so fast there was no time to catch her as she tripped over the arm and landed on the floor. I jumped up to help her off the floor.

"Don't touch me!" the volume of her voice took me off guard and I backed away ever so slightly. I was flabbergasted and speechless. Her eyes began welling with tears and I replayed my plan in my head.

Tell her the truth so there are no secrets. She'll embrace you and you'll be together forever. This didn't seem to be going as planned in the slightest.

"But I told you everything. This was supposed to bring us closer and initiate our romance." My face fell as I kneeled toward her with my hand extended to help her up.

"You're the one in the paper...three years. And you expected me to be in love with you after telling me that you've slaughtered and raped countless woman?" when she put it that way my plan seemed foiled from the start, I had to try and redeem myself. She pounced for the door but I stopped her with one gentle, rather hard punch which put her back to the ground. I wasn't sure whether it was the punch or her head coming into contact with the table before hitting the ground but she was out cold. Great, I thought.

- This was the point where I sat in the red suede chair and reflected. I was so blinded by my infatuation with her I hadn't considered that she could possibly not want me. But why would she? No one else ever had, what was different about her? Patricia didn't react in the exact way I'd expected her to and while she explained at the beginning everything I said would be confidential could I really

believe her at this point? She had tried to race through the door, only as I can assume to try to divulge my secret to the authorities. I was in a predicament and only had a few options and a few minutes to comprise another plan. I could kill her now and leave. I could leave without killing her but she would be still able to report me. Two options, neither of which had the time to be executed.

I felt a smash against my temple then felt a warm drip down my face. Turns out she hit me with a vase full of dead flowers in the head with an ample amount of force. Ironic. My rationality was thrown at bay and I reacted. I grabbed her with a quickness even I didn't expect and she was on the floor in a split second. My hand covered her mouth. What was I going to do now? I wanted to stop with this nonsense, but there was no other way to get the woman I wanted. How much longer could I continue what I had been doing all these years? I wanted to change, it was up to her. I bent over and whispered in her ear something to the effect of,

"This can be over if you promise you'll love me. I'll change; I can be a better man." I pulled my hand off her mouth enough to hear her choke out a reply to my ultimatum.

"Over my dead body." A very poor choice of words given my history, but none the less I'd prepared for them to be her last. Patricia clearly wasn't the woman I was seeking. She was just like all the others, nothing special, nothing to think twice about. I ripped off her blouse and stuffed it into her mouth. I was gripping my hands around her throat when the walls came crashing down.

Had it been any other day but Wednesday the ditzy receptionist would have been gone at three. Of course it was a Wednesday and she called for security after hearing the loud bang, which was Patricia's head hitting the table and then the floor. I knew I didn't like that bimbo the second I laid eyes on her.

So here I am, in my nine by nine cell, with my twenty two inch TV and stacks of fan and hate mail to keep me company. I assume the cliché that you "can't teach an old dog new tricks" as my motto of life. I am who I am, you can only fight who you are for so long.

Patricia still visits me. Every time I'm up for parole she comes and testifies that I should rot in this hole for the remainder of my pathetic life.

It's all her fault. It was her eyes.

NIGHT ABOUT THE TOWN

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TODD RUNGE

STORY: RICHARD COLWELL AWARD

This is a creepy mood-piece of a story. Very little happens on the page, but much is implied as we follow the unexplained meanderings of aptly-named Truk Coldwater through his town. He remembers an unsettling conversation and then finds himself pondering the meaning of "garbage" as he walks. Danger, in the form of an unseen follower, or an at-large rapist, is always prevalent, and as we wait, along with Truk, for something to happen, he sees a very disturbing thing in the garbage he haunts. Hemingway's "iceberg principal," where little is told but much implied, works beautifully here in this disturbing piece. — Tom Franklin

It's this town; Truk Coldwater was thinking to himself as he walked collar-up with his hands in his denim coat pockets. It's this town and probably everyone in it. He kicked a can off the curb and against an empty dumpster. That's it. It's not just the town and the garbage, it's the people. They are the garbage. They are whatever is lying around all over these streets. You can't blame inanimate objects: they go where people go. And buildings for that matter, it's not their fault; they are just tools for people. Anyway the older buildings in this town are interesting, almost beautiful, like people didn't even build them; surely these people couldn't have. Truk switched up his steps and crossed the street after the cars cleared. It may have appeared to anyone that he was progressing toward a destination, but really he was out in the evening with nowhere in mind to go.

Truk was remembering an encounter he had had with this guy earlier that day. He couldn't recall his name, or even if he ever knew it, but he knew he had recognized this guy from time to time in random places before. Truk was waiting for the number forty-two to take him downtown when he heard this guy from behind him.

"Hey, cold enough for ya today?" said the quasi-familiar stranger. Truk turned his head.

"No." Truk said, to him the conversation had ended before it even started.

"Shit where's this global warming I been hearin' about?" the guy said determined to get something out of Truk.

"Be patient." Truk offered.

"Damn, says here fifty percent chance of snow tomorrow." the guy said and smacked the folded newspaper in his hand.

"Yeah, you're right, either it will or it won't." quipped Truk.

There was a pause, though not a long pause before the guy tried again.

"How about those gas prices?"

"What about them?" Truk acted as though the question was

completely foreign to him.

"Oh, it's just killing me, that's why I'm taking the bus." the guy said caught off guard and searching for some hidden logic in the dialogue.

"Yeah?" Truk questioned with little conviction and more sarcasm. There was another pause.

"Did you hear about that nurse?" said the guy switching gears.

"No."

"Well, she works over at St. Bernard's, I mean she used to, but, she was working late and she came up missing half way through her shift. I believe she worked in the psych ward. Anyway, nobody'd seen or heard from her in a day or two. Then they found her, well most of her, down by the river, beaten beyond recognition, nurse's uniform torn open, head ripped off, raped, the works, this guy had a field day with her. The world today, I just don't know."

"Me neither," Truk said relieved to see the number forty-two approaching the stop, "this is my bus."

Truk had thought little about the encounter afterward, but now he couldn't get the guy's last words out of his head, "The world today," spoken like it was the last and only intelligent thing somebody could have said in response to a world so messed up and completely unrecognizable from... from what? From what they were used to? Where do these people come from? Do they even know the world today? Have they ever really looked at the world? Questions, and more questions. Truk never understood rhetorical questions, but that was all he seemed left with when it came to people: questions without answers.

As Truk continued to walk there was a moment when he heard something behind him. It was probably just a startled stray cat, but a needle spike of adrenaline stuck his body for an instant and he became aware of his surroundings. It was the industrial side of town. There were rail tracks his feet went over and stacks of smoke lit red in the sky. He had gone this way on night excursions before, but he rarely gave any thought to his solitude. There was always a white wash of low hums and factory noises that were

a scribbling of pencil lead on lined paper to his thoughts. His thoughts were his only company. And his thoughts were beginning to race. Look at this mess out here. People don't make anything here, there is nothing to make here. Garbage. These are garbage factories. People bring in garbage melt it down and reshape it, and take it somewhere else where they sell it. And then people buy the garbage for more garbage and then send it away as garbage just to get more garbage. That is the only thing out here, garbage.

Truk found himself struck with the urge to head back. He felt he had walked far enough. Turning his course through a narrow alley with a chain link fence to one side he negotiated his way. At one point he was squeezing himself between the fence and a dumpster. Garbage was piled up against a building on the other side. He couldn't avoid all of it. Instead he kicked at it to clear a path. Then he noticed, before he took a step, a hand on the ground in the garbage. It was a human hand. His eyes failed to focus. Is it attached? His brain searched for a reaction. There wasn't one. He finished his step, over the hand, and found the corner of the building which was the end of the alley and stood there for a moment. He wanted to keep walking. There was nothing else to do and he continued on. The rest of the way home he found himself without many thoughts, except he wondered what he would think about when he got back to his one bedroom apartment.



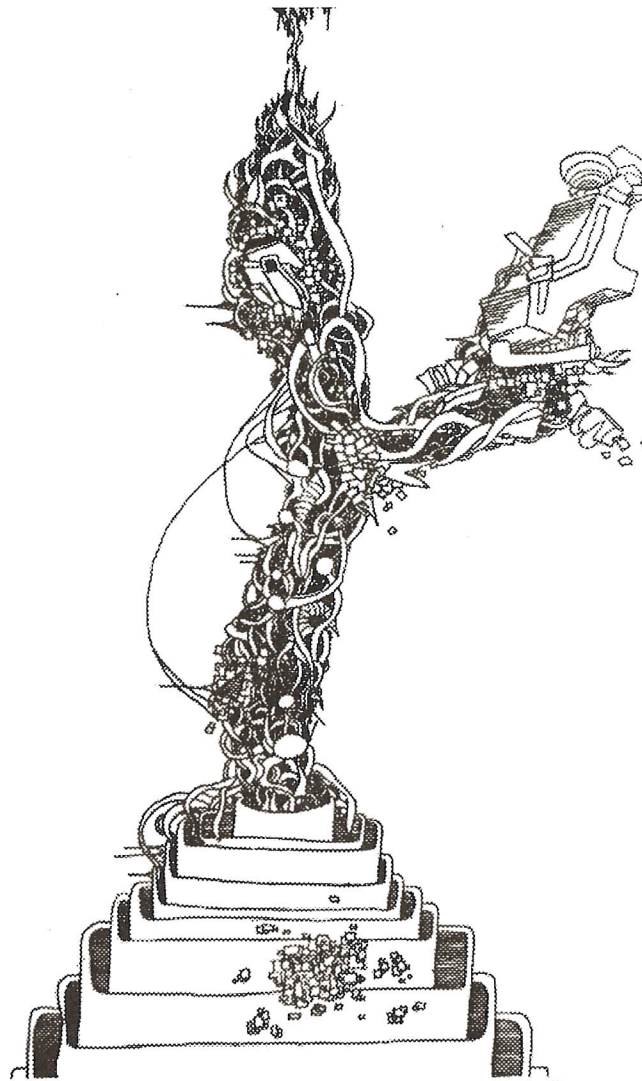
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BECOME

EDWARD KINDSVATER

FIRST PLACE



REACH

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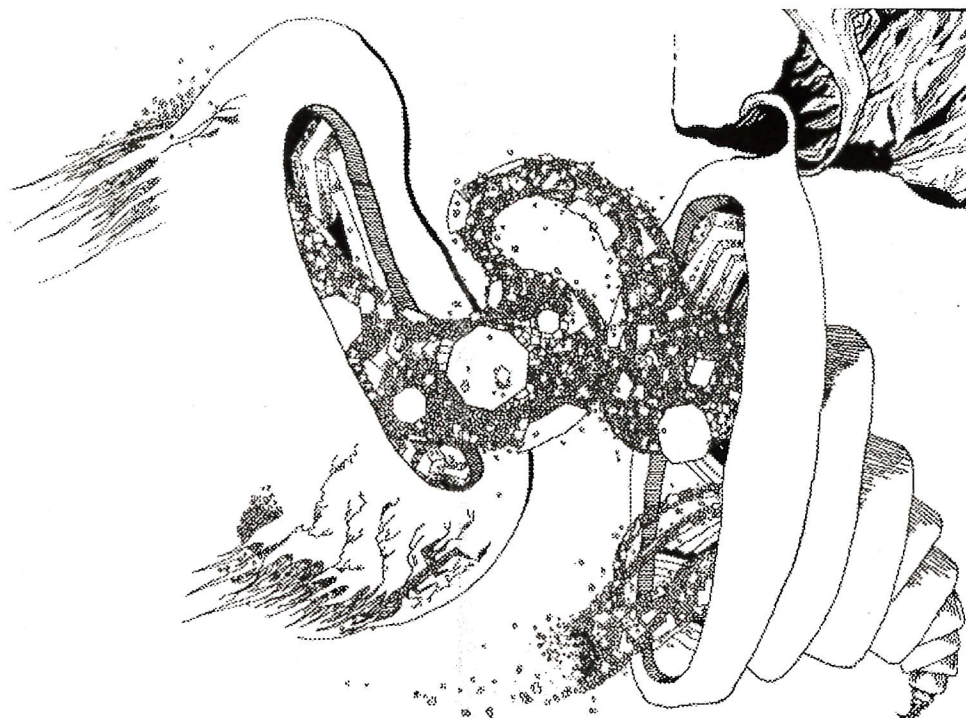
FIRST PLACE



BROKEN CURIOSITY

EDWARD KINDSVATER

FIRST PLACE



SKELETON

DAVID WORDEN

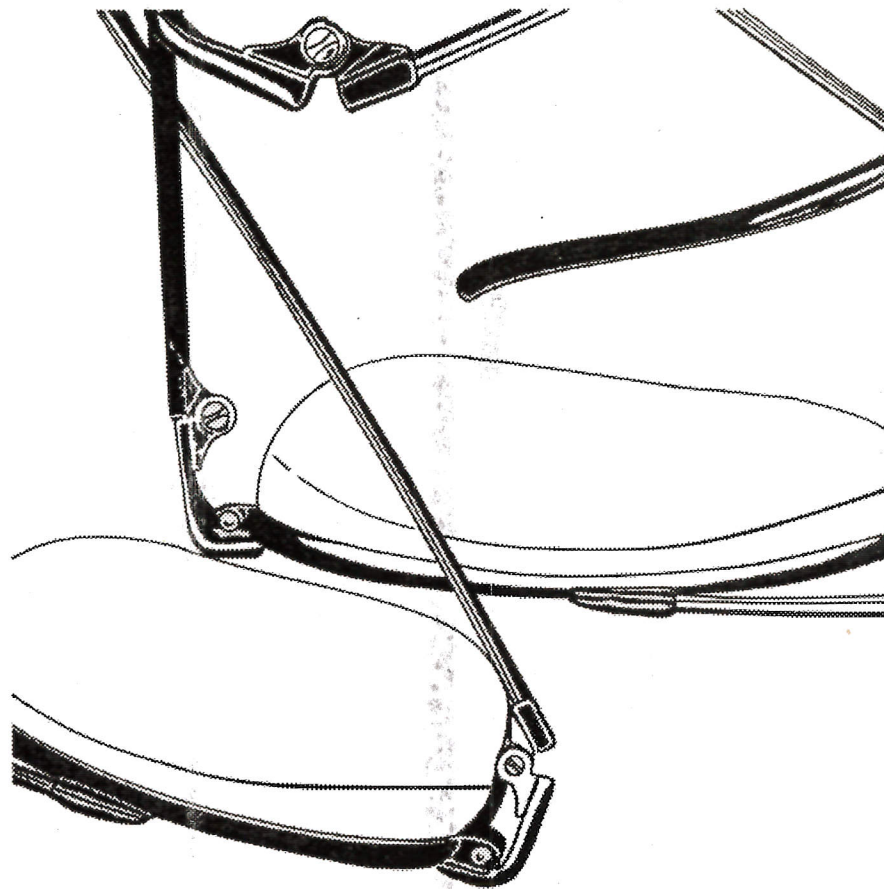
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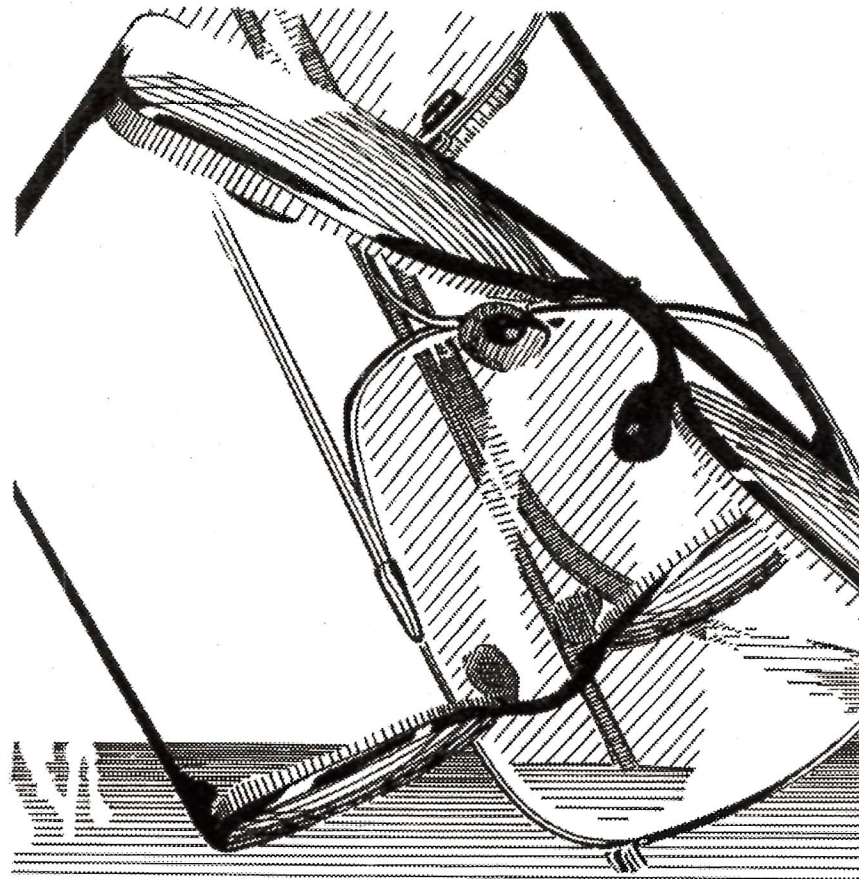
THIRD PLACE



POLARIZED

EMILY KRUTSCH

THIRD PLACE



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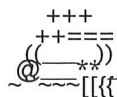
WONDER YEARS

TARA BRITZ

Looking at the photograph from my childhood, I'd like to think I remember just how it felt to be there and then, at that age and that time. According to my mother's careful and slow yet light and loopy handwriting on the back, I was four years old. I am standing in the dusk on the cracked sidewalk in front of our old grey dilapidated rental house with the looming maple tree in the front yard that annually rained propellers. With a blonde head of ringlets, I am dressed comfortably in a cotton ruffle sleeved t-shirt, loose purple khaki pants with an elastic waist, and flip-flops. In my right hand, all aglow, is a sparkler, and my other arm is raised back along with my head as I tip my magic wand and wave it around in zigzags in the evening air. I am happy and queen of my universe. I don't know what causes the tiny sparks that illuminate the darkness, or why the small flecks of light hitting my feet do not burn my toes; all I know is that they are mine, a part of my wand, and I control how they dance through the early summer air, until they burn out. I was queen of my universe. Life was wonder and possibility.

In another photograph, I don a pair of silver wings made by my mother out of tin foil surrounding cardboard, with bits of colored construction paper cut out in various shapes and glued on for decoration. I was a fairy princess. I remember I told my cousins that they were real wings and that I could fly, and you know what, I think I actually believed I could.

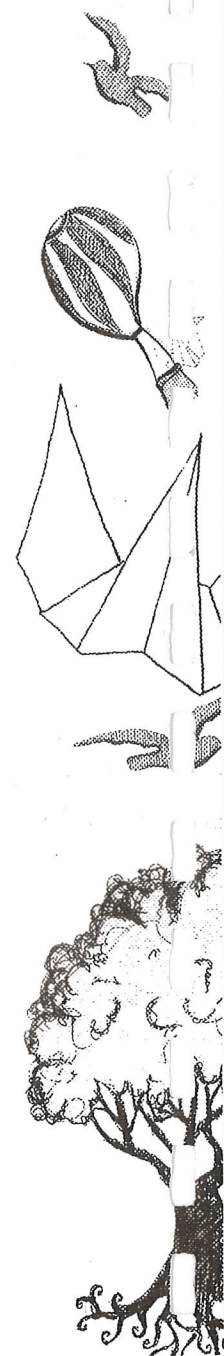
When I was a little girl, I was queen of my universe, a fairy princess, and also a giant. I thoroughly abused the power of the



latter by stepping on ants, stomping in slow motion through their tiny ant villages, delighting in watching them scatter with panic in all directions and crushing them mercilessly one, or two, or even three at a time with the sole of my giant pink jelly shoes.

I was a giant, but as I grew up, I grew down. Every queen's reign must come to an end one way or another, and I eventually shook off most of the fairy dust with the help of some of the inevitable visitors in the course of one's life. I am glad I have the photographs to remind me of what I was. However, what I later became and what I have become today has largely to do with moments not captured in any photographs. As I write now, random memories flash through my mind, leaping from one scene to another where some of these visitors called upon me—namely, death, shame, disappointment, self compromise, and betrayal—unwelcomed yet inevitable, the universal callers on everyone's lives.

I recall my first visit with death. It comes to me in fragments— isolated, vivid snapshots with blurred transitions. I am five years old. It is the middle of the afternoon. The house is dark and still except for one disturbing sound. I hear my mother cry, and this is not just any cry, but the mournful, heaving sobbing of a child at her wits end. It is the cry of loss and despair. As I step quietly by the door, she is caught off guard, notices me and with a quick, "I'm okay. Don't worry," closes it quietly, disappearing into the darkness of the room.



At the wake, I proudly show off my shiny new red shoes to downcast, weeping faces. I have not fully realized that the man who kept a little red harmonica in his pocket so small that fit in-between his lips without revealing itself, and who liked to use this effect to try and fool his granddaughter was permanently gone. It was only later, feeling his absence visit after visit to my grandmother's house, that I fully realized the irreversibility of death. The salt and pepper haired man smelling of cigars, who always had sweet and sour suckers to hand out, and who was my accomplice stealing candies off a birthday cake when no one was looking—my grandfather would no longer be there to play his little red harmonica or assist me in birthday cake crimes.

At the wake, I only know now that the way their faces hang before me is unsettling. Attempts at keeping their voices light to compliment a small child on her new shoes are unsuccessful, as this child detects something distinctly different in the familiar voices—somber undertones and the room itself is draped in melancholy and eerie stillness in spite of the presence of sound. My mother's sobbing and seeing the disconsolate expressions on my grown-up relative's faces, stays with me as the beginning, my introduction to the concept of death. I had been told prior to the wake that he died, but what does death mean to a child? It is a concept that takes time to grasp, but I first begin to see what it means reflected in the tears of those closest to me. Who could forget their first visit with mortality? Even as queen of my own world my magic sparkling wand was powerless to the indifferent hands of death. Death left the parting gift of realization that life is real and finite. I never intentionally stepped on another ant again.

In another memory, shame came to call on me. I am standing on the other side of a metal fence, one of my hands grasping the fence through one of the spaces in the diagonal design as I chatted with my friend on the other side. She was the same age as me; probably we were around seven or so. She could do cartwheels and the splits. She was not afraid to pick up a worm with her bare hands and tear it into two to make what she called two worms. In many ways, she was my opposite. She had dark, smooth, never frizzy, straight hair that always seemed to be in place and skin that did not burn, but tanned easily brown in the summer. She lived in the big red house next door with the neat lawn bordered annually by bright yellow marigolds in orderly little parallel rows.

She always seemed as shiny and fresh as her always-bought-new, neatly pressed, always matching clothing that never seemed to get dirty or rumpled in any adventure of play. She had a brand new, shiny blue bicycle, a baby doll that talked, and her very own room. From this I could only conclude that she was rich. I looked down at my disheveled clothing, hand me downs from the neighbors across the street, jeans grass-stained at the knees and a soft pastel baby blue t-shirt marred with mud, remnants of an earlier made mud-pie in the alley behind my backyard, along with some mystery red substance of sorts, probably absentmindedly spilled from that lunch's spaghettiOs. I was a mess. Suddenly, looking down at myself across the fence at a girl who would never ever be so clumsy as to spill spaghettiOs on herself, my face burned with shame redder than the stain itself. The giant was shrinking. Sure could've used those fairy wings to fly away. Shame, promising to return again, left as a parting gift the realization of a world of inequality and differences, and a new battle to be fought against the menaces of pride and inferiority.

Four years later I reticently walked down the church aisle. Left foot, come together, right foot, come together. I laughed to myself as the woman at the piano who must have been at least a hundred years old sang out in a scratchy, weathered, overly soprano voice the unrequested lyrics to Bette Midler's "Some Say Love" song, causing the guests to wince and then attempt to cover up this automatic reaction out of the duty of respect. As I walked, I looked down at my attire, loathing the tasteless puffy blue dress I wore, decorated in dozens of tacky little darker blue bows and resentfully remembering earlier that month when my father sat with me in the church pews asking me whether or not I would be a bridesmaid in his wedding. I was uncomfortable and trying to find the nicest way to refuse the request, when my stepmother, a slightly yet perhaps unintentionally pushy, vulnerable bleach blonde, prone to chain-smoking and fond of miniature carousels and ceramic cats, came rushing up. She had been asked to give us a moment and was waiting a few feet ahead of us down the aisle when she evidently smelled resistance and came pouncing upon me like a lion on a gazelle. "But don't you want to be a bridesmaid and wear a pretty dress?" she insisted in a babyish voice I found patronizing for such a grown-up eleven-year-old girl such as myself. I replied respectfully that I would rather not. I did not wish to participate in a day that seemed to me to celebrate the downfall of our original family, and to do it in a hideous dress which I felt to be a reflection

of the painful circumstances that had led up to this moment. A dress that, though worn by me, like the wedding itself, I felt somehow had nothing to do with me at all. My dad's response was a convincing, "It's okay, honey. I understand. You can sit it out."

It wasn't the first time my father had ever lied to me, and it wasn't the last, but it remains in my mind, I believe, because of the seriousness of the day's event and the impact of the particular visitors that day, self compromise, disappointment, and betrayal. These visitors let me know as I never had before what inferiority felt like, and strengthened what I had already begun to learn, that adults, even those closest to you whom you most admired, were not perfect.

We all have many visitors in our lives who can collectively be named experience. Experience shapes us. It grinds against us and strips off our fairy wings. However, in time we might receive a new pair, only with this pair we won't be as prone to crashing into walls. Experience teaches us about ourselves, about life.

Death reveals to us how impermanent and therefore all the more precious life is as a result. It gives us the opportunity to live the best we can, be the best we can, here and now. It reveals to us what loved ones lost have meant to us. (I will not soon forget my birthday cake thief companion.) Ironically, being the end of life, it reveals to us life's beauty, and beckons us to live life.

Shame can reveal to us the nature of self-doubt and challenge us to rise above it, showing us how we are so much more than material things, bikes, dolls, perfect houses. Our exteriors can be stained, but that doesn't mean our interiors have to be. We are all visited by self-compromise, disappointment, and betrayal. These things humble us. They show us that we are not truly queens or kings of the world. The world belongs to us all.

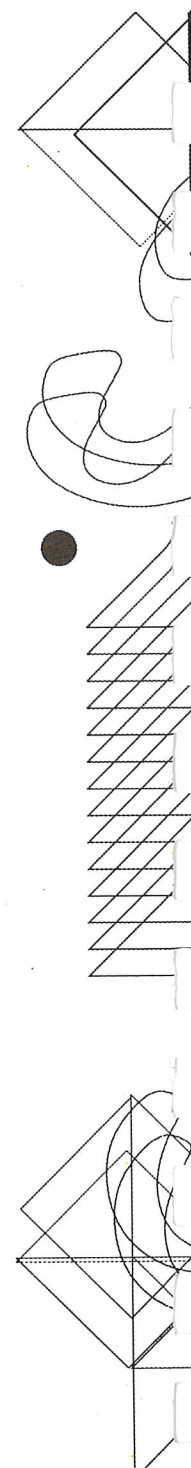
We learn that others can hurt us, but that hurt also reveals to us our love and admiration for them, for they could not disappoint us so otherwise. We learn to forgive. We learn to be humble.

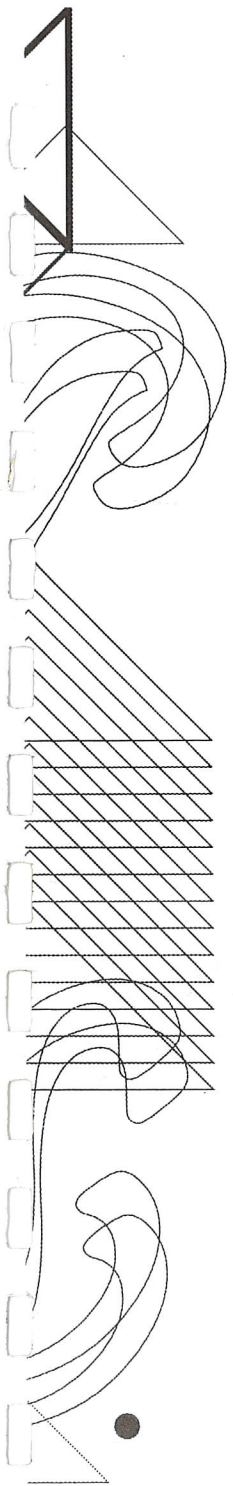
No pain, no gain. So the expression goes. Life experience is analogous to growing pains. We start out in those wonder years, but we never really have to leave them behind. Innocence may fade, but wonder doesn't have to. Experience and knowledge can

increase wonder. There is beauty to be found in truths discovered.

I am no longer a giant who crushes ants. I know that there is chemistry that makes a sparkler sparkle and that it doesn't burn your skin because temperature is different from heat. Still I marvel at the scientific truths that make this so. A simple sparkler still amazes me and brings me to wonder, but for perhaps different reasons than in my early years. Now I think of the energy it produces and I think of the nature of energy, how it cannot be created or destroyed, how it stands absolute and permanent in juxtaposition to our own short lives, how we ourselves are made up of matter and energy...and I get lost in thought, in wonder. I admire the glow of the sparkler, and I think about light and how without it we could not see, not a face in front of us nor stars billions of miles away; I think about how light itself moves quickly, traveling unimaginable distances and allows us to see these stars as they were perhaps many years before. I am amazed and in awe when I imagine how vast, how infinite, how endless the universe must be, and here I stand, once a little girl in the photograph with her sparkler, smaller than an ant when compared to the universe, who thought of herself as queen of it all.

Life inevitably calls to our attention certain realities and presents us with challenges. But there is still wonder to be found in truth and joy to be found in sparklers and life before they burn out.





BATTLING FEAR

BRITTNI KRUL ++++&&\$++== _____)++++&&\$++== _____-

It's seven forty-five on the morning of May 13th. Instead of being in bed sleeping like I normally would, I find myself sulking down a long white hallway with its perfectly cleaned blue carpet. I'm coming from a very unpleasant visit with a bathroom where instead of peeing in the toilet a nurse prefers me to pee in a very small cup for a very large pee. However I'm not worried about the people playing with my pee, I'm more worried the real reason that I'm here and everything else seems a blur.

If it wasn't for Justin's clammy hand holding mine in a loving touch and tiny sparks of encouragement forcing their way out of my other loved ones, I would be long gone, out the door never to be seen again. We cut through the fog of worry looming in the hallway. Not a single one wishes to put me through this torture but it will all be for the best in the end, I hope. As we round the corner a larger glass prison is revealed, this prison is where I must go and where my loved ones will have to sit unknowing of my fate. Someone ahead heaves the door open and I am smothered in a bright fluorescent light and that overly clean stench that screams doctor.

Before I know it I find myself trapped in the glass prison but fear has sucked away every last bit of fight left in me. Aimlessly I find a place to sit as everyone shadows around me. As soon as I am seated, I'm now lost in my fears and my "what ifs". Fear dances to the surface and my body trembles against it. I feel a slight tug back to reality when Justin caresses the top my hand, but it is

only a slight comfort because I can sense his own fear which only strengthens my own. Back in reality I can feel all the uneasiness around me. It is apparent that no one likes this and is trying to be strong. I force my face to show nothing but I can't stop me feet from trying to walk away, they bounce against my unwillingness to lead them out the door.

A figure emerges from the light and beckons me forward. Everyone wishes me luck and tells me I'll be fine. I fight against the fear and give a weak smile back. Grudgingly I make my way to the figure dressed in white. This nurse leads me to a hallway of rooms and lockers. We stop in front of one closet like room and she tells me remove my clothes and replace them with I paper sheet she refers to a gown. Then continues by saying after I changed I can place my belonging into one of the lockers across from me and leaves me to my solitude.

I'm now alone trapped in a little white box with my looming thoughts. I busy myself with the task of changing, doing my best to ignore the ever present worries in my mind and fight to prohibit my hands from shaking and to do the task at hand. Finally, I manage to wrestle out of my clothes and replace them with the rather breezy hospital gown. Lastly I have to remove the glittering reminder of how much Justin cares; if only I could get the clasp off without shaking or fighting my own will to leave it on. Gently I place the necklace into my purse and take one last glance at my cell phone. A small smile streaks across my face when I see my

best friend has texted me a good luck with a funny little sideways smile. She always seems to know how to make me smile but I couldn't stay in this happy moment, for I have to brave on.

Forcing courage to my face I slide out the door with belongings in hand, pick the closest locker and stuff them in. That same nurse catches me in her spotlight as I round the corner and shows me to the room I must lie in and await my doom. I wait there for what feels like hours as she runs to get some things. I glance about the room trying to keep my mind off my fears, I wait. Finally I notice the nurse coming back with a warm blanket. However, that blanket is no good news to me; they only bring the blanket to lighten the mood before it is stabbed away with a venomous IV.

Now I see the sack of liquid dangling at the end of the bed. All that is awaiting me next is pain, sheer and utter pain. The nurse notices the fear splashed across my face and I reassure her that it is not her; it is my immense fear of the long brutally sharp object she is preparing to impale me with. Her words try to shine through the fog of my fears but it is no use. A cold wet cloth slides across the top of my hand and a rubber snake constricts my upper arm. My veins shrink back in fear hiding from their impending doom, which only makes the process worse. A small needle swoops down and stings my hand giving it a numb feeling. Then a much larger needle drives in for the kill. My face is snapped to look away from the battle on my hand. All the muscles are scrunched in to the center of my face and I hiss out in pain. The needle wiggles around under my skin searching for a vein to crawl into. The mission is not completed and another nurse steps in to take the other nurse's place. The snake constricts tighter, a cold hand beats down my arm searching for my hiding veins. One small vein appears to the new nurse and she goes in for the kill. One more stings then a stab and the mission is complete, but there is a snag. The IV seems to be malfunctioning and must be fixed, leaving me to feel the wiggling around under my skin. The two nurse's work together and finally the agony is over.

One nurse cleans up while the other retrieves my loved ones from the glass prison, the first nice thing they have done since I walked back here. I lie there waiting glaring at the twisting tubes that now make a part of my wrist. Suddenly, I hear the familiar chatter of those I know and love. Gliding in through the doorway they horseshoe around the bed. They all start cheeping in my ear trying

to avoid discussing the issue at hand. Eventually I force them into to talking about it because I thought it would lessen the building tension. The adults conversation unfortunately begins drifted to their past surgeries, and Justin and I squirm and tell them to stop they're only making it worse. We all chuckle trying to laugh through our own fears and their realization they were scaring me. Quick beeping breaks through the tense laughter and there is no more hiding my festering fears. My dad points out that my heart rate is above the normal. Mother pokes at me for worries. She jokes that I always worry too much and it's not helping any. Justin's mom giggles in agreement still holding her angelic composure. Finally Justin peeks out of his corner and gives me the never to fail "I told you so" grin.

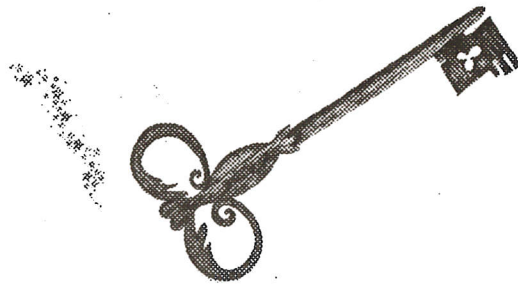
One nurse pops in when we all were buzzing about my persistent beating heart and my dad suggested they give me something to calm my nerves. They all are excited about how wonderful I am going to feel and for the first time I get the odd feeling that they wish they were in my spot. Justin's mom says so and I was willing to switch her spots, but I knew that was not going to happen. Nurse is back and medicine is slipped into my IV and all becomes a dream. Through a blur I become silent and listen to them chatter on about this and that. The bars are brought up around me and helpless I am pulled from my sea of people; our brief happiness is pushed away with a crushing wave of fear.

I'm pushed into a room of curtains. After a few minutes I feel pain shoot through my IV, what happened next is blank, nothingness. After what feels like a few minutes I stir to consciousness blinking the light out of my eyes, wonder if it's over. I'm not sure. I try to move and I feel it, the oddity in my breast. I peek into the paper thin gown and comfort wraps around me as I reveal a shiny new scar in place of the odd lump. Another blur and with happiness I awake to my love ones with gifts in hand. A little overwhelmed they excitedly thrust their gifts in my face. Justin's mom holds up bright yellow flowers. While she continues on my mother hands me this silly looking fat purple butterfly with tiny wings. The medicine allows me to give her the scowl I would have otherwise hide. The medicine also isn't so helpful when Justin presents me with a stuffed dog that looks exactly like his own and I blurted out, "Oh it's Lola," with a nasty undertone. They must not have noticed my misplaced remark because his mom raves of about their perfect little demon dog. Justin then shyly shows me the really cool water



bottle he got me. Dad just stands there and observes which is nothing new.

After all that the only thing I wanted to do is go home. If I could be home I would know that it was and I could rest and everyone would be a peace. Finally after what felt like forever the nurse says I can go, as soon as the IV is out. She grabs some supplies and slides the IV out replacing it with a Band-Aid. I looked away but Justin did not. We all are now worried about him because he looks like he is going to faint. It is then I realized that we all have reasons to fear but with people who love us no fear is faced alone. We burst out the hospital door with a sigh of relief. Sunshine and a warm bed awaiting nothing else matters.



SUNSHINE AND
A WARM BED
AWAITING
NOTHING ELSE
MATTERS.

THE SWEET TASTE OF HUNGER

ORALEE HERNANDEZ

I've heard hunger described in many ways. The most common description I've read is "rats gnawing at my stomach." To me, however, hunger is a sweet taste in your mouth. I'm talking about the kind of hunger that makes your mouth salivate so much you have to swallow just to keep from drooling. It is not like your regular saliva which has no taste—hunger saliva has a sweet taste.

This was just what I was tasting one cold winter morning at the age of fifteen years. Both my parents had been hospitalized. My father was diabetic and my mother couldn't walk because of back problems. I had been allowed to quit school under hardship conditions. My two older brothers had cut out when things got hard and gone to live in the city with my cousins. I had been left to care for six younger brothers and sisters.

With six younger siblings depending on me I was desperately trying to brainstorm. Our closest neighbor was a hog farmer a quarter mile down the road and we didn't really know him. I got dressed in warm clothes and walked through the snow drifts to the orchard at the end of the field. There I found a big stick and I dug some frozen apples out of the snow. I took them home, washed them, and baked them. They were the most delicious apples we had ever tasted.

A few hours later I decided to go see if I could find some more apples. My heart nearly stopped as I saw that the apple orchard was full of hogs. The hog farmer's hogs had gotten out and were in the apple orchard eating the apples. I stood at the window, helplessly watching our only source of food disappear.

I heard one of my brothers yelling and pointing out the window. There, right in front of my window, a hog had wandered away from the rest and ended up in my front yard. Suddenly all I could see was floating ham and bacon. I wanted that hog, but how? How to kill a hog?

As I stood there staring at the hog, a story my father had once told came to mind. My father had worked in a slaughterhouse. He had killed cows by hitting them on the head with an ax, not with the sharp end but with the blunt end. I was scared but I was also very hungry. Hunger made me brave. I decided to try killing the hog. I ran into the kitchen, searching through all the cupboards looking for some scrap of food. Finally in one of the bottom cupboards I found a piece of wilted cabbage. Now I ran to the basement to get the ax.

With pounding heart and shaky hands I went out to deal with the hog. I threw the piece of cabbage in front of it. Now, I looked at the hog and he stared back at me. Thoughts flew through my head like poison. What if I didn't kill it, but only made it mad? What if it attacked me? Could I fight it off? I was quaking inside, but I was also very determined. I had to raise the ax. When I raised the ax, the hog looked up; when I lowered the ax, the hog looked down. After the second time I just waited with the ax raised. When the hog looked down I swung the ax and the hog toppled over dead. Hunger had sharpened my senses and given me the courage I needed. I walked away from that experience feeling stronger than a Brave, and I let out a Tarzan yell before going into the house. There was still a lot to be done.

BROKEN SILENCE

RACHEL KEARNEY

She walked out of the lunch line with one of the blandest meals ever thought up. Some meat patty on a bun, rigid french fries, and 2% white milk. She was on her way to sit at the usual table with all her usual and interchangeable friends. Right before sitting down, she noticed him. She noticed him the same way she always noticed him, pretending as though she didn't. She sat and her body grew stiff, as though she were trying to move more gracefully; more perfectly. She didn't know why she did this, he wouldn't be watching her. Fumbling with the task of opening her milk, she realized she forgot her straw. When she'd almost reached the straws, she turned and nearly stumbled into him. They both stopped in their tracks, a few feet from each other. He looked at her through the aqua blue eyes he possessed and couldn't even find words to speak. He quickly looked away and shuffled back toward the table he came from. She knew now was different than every day before; today was going to be different.

"Rob. Don't walk away from me. Not again."

He stopped and turned slightly. "What?"

"Um..." she stammered. Being in this moment now was different than how she'd imagine it to be. "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

"If you really want to," he said as though it had no point. "Where do you want to go?"

"The coffeehouse," she said after thinking for only a second. It

had been their place; their very favorite. "Do you want to meet me there after school?"

"Yeah. I get out at 3."

"Then I'll see you a little after 3."

The time had come and gone and she found herself sitting on a couch at the coffeehouse, waiting. The wafting smell of the coffee beans downstairs was refreshing, something she enjoyed taking in slowly. The dim lighting put her in a mood worth settling into.

It had been one month since they broke up. It was odd how fast the days went by, and how slowly the moments went by now. She wondered what she would manage to say while in his presence. No amount of words would explain the way she felt. How strange it felt to go to all their old places like this coffeehouse and be sitting alone. The way his old hoodie smelled like the last summer's bonfires and wet grass where they used to lay. How much she missed the way he used to say, "I want to hold you in my arms forever." He was something she never thought she'd get over. She had however made it this far. She had spoken to him rather than ignore him as she had done for the last month. She'd even gotten him to agree to meet her somewhere.

"Hey. What's up?" He dropped his schoolbag and sat beside her. "Did you already order?"

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"No. I thought I'd wait for you."

"Oh, thanks." He stared out the window. "It's starting to drizzle outside."

"Yeah," she said after taking a glance out the window. "I guess it is." He grew silent and she knew she would have to speak if they were to talk. "How have you been?"

"I've been doing alright...you?"

"You don't have to ask to figure it out."

"Ok," he sneered.

"Well," she said, "are you happy now?"

"I'm happier than I have been."

"So...aren't you going to ask me now if I'm happy or not?"

"No, I don't really feel like it."

"You don't feel like it. Do you feel anything anymore?" She was almost asking herself.

"Mary. I know this last month hasn't been easy. Breaking up was a hard thing for me, too."

"But...I know, I know it was."

"We're not the only couple to ever break up. It wasn't working."

"Then why did it work fine before?"

He mumbled, "I don't know."

"Have you ever...do you ever see us being together again?"

"How can you ask me that?"

"How can't you answer that?"

"No, ok," he blurted out, "I don't see us being together ever again."

The softness of the music playing on the radio and the dullness of

strangers talking took over their conversation. She sat there as still as a stone sculpture.

"I – I'm sorry. I'm not trying to hurt you. I never wanted to do that. I just don't want to be with you anymore."

"Ok," she said tonelessly.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

He got up and walked out the door, letting it shut behind him. He got into his rusty truck, throwing his backpack in the backseat. He didn't start the engine for a moment, just sitting there, staring down at the wheel. Then he started the truck and pulled out onto the street, getting farther and farther away into the drizzling rain.

All the while, she was still sitting frozen as the time went by. They'd managed to have their whole conversation even before ordering drinks. Mary picked up her purse and put on her coat and headed for the door.

"Hey, how are you doing?" someone said to her as she reached the bottom of the staircase. It was Brent, one of the waiters.

"I'm doing...alright," Mary said without much expression.

"What can I get you to drink?"

"I'm actually just heading out."

"Oh that's no fun," he replied with a pout on his face. "But leave if you must. Let me get the door for you."

"Thanks," she said as he held open the heavy door and she walked out.

She was hurting right now, deep inside to the point where she felt injured. She knew it would hurt no matter what way she thought about it, so she tried not to even think. She started making her way through the rain when Brent shouted her name.

"Hey," he said. "You forgot your scarf."

"Oh, thanks." She took the long, stringy thing from him and wrapped it around her neck.

"Um, are you doing anything Saturday?"

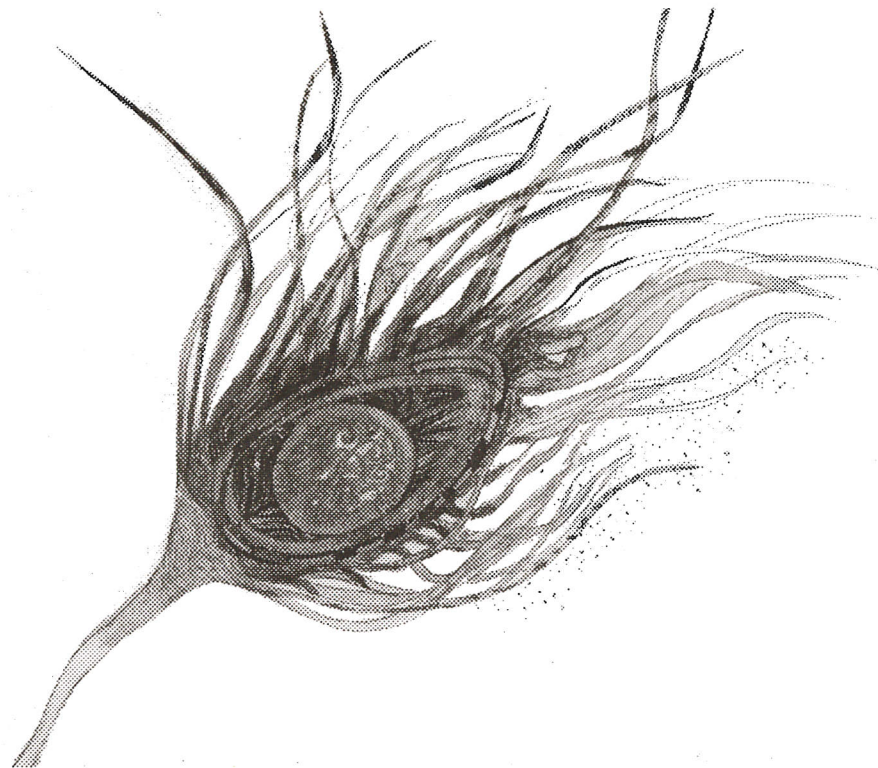
"This Saturday?"

"Yeah."

"Uh, no I don't think I'm doing anything," she said slowly.

"You want to get some dinner...with me?"

She thought for a second. She decided it might be good to do anything that would prevent her from thinking about the recent situation; prevent her from thinking at all.



SILHOUETTE

ALEXANDER MEYER ++++&&\$+||== &&\$+||== _)))

11:47 PM: Thoughts race through my mind as I scramble toward my hotel room, the tactless and nonsensical pattern of the carpet a reflection of my jumbled thoughts. 203, 204, 206, FUCK! I finally reach my room and fumble with the key, missing the slot several times before finally sliding it home. The door swings open.

I feel like I'd been hit in the face. The reeking scent of cigarettes is almost physically painful. I throw my duffel bag onto the bed and pace the room as the door clicks shut by itself. Any attempt to record my thoughts in print would result in nothing but an endless stream of garbage, punctuated by obscenity and a few other select words, words like why and could have done stand out from the noise, but the rest is a blur. In the dark and reeking hotel room, my thoughts burst and reform exactly two hours in the past.

9:47 PM: A dark green Ford Taurus cruises down the Pennsylvania interstate, the coming night casting a mist over the rural landscape. My left hand loosely holds the steering wheel, handling the low hills with little effort. The fingers of my right hand are entwined with yours, gently playing with your little silver ring. A soft sound escapes your lips as you shift your head against the window, somehow finding the vibrating glass comfortable enough to fall asleep on. My nose is suddenly assaulted with a strange mixture of smells, your light perfume mixing with the dark, offensive scent of cigarettes. As terrible as the smell is, it carries many memories. I grab the ashtray and dump the few butts and ashes out the window, yet the scent still lingers. Somehow, I take

comfort in that. Highway 210 stretches before me, before us. Each billboard and advertisement for 99 cent tacos seems to blur into a stream of lights and sounds.

As my senses are battered by the smell of your bad habits, the visual monotony of the road, and my desire to hear you accept my apologies, my thoughts burst.

10:15 PM: Tom Jones croons to you through the radio. A twitch forms below my right eye. I'm startled to hear your voice slither through the mix like a smooth saxophone lick.

"Hey, you."

"Oh, hey... We should be there in another hour or so."

You stretch and rub your eyes, pulling the hood of your purple sweatshirt down to your nose and mumble, "Good, I can't wait to get out of here." You then pull a cigarette from your small purse, light it and take a drag.

"You know, I've been trying to get you to quit smoking for about three months now. Do you even care that it bugs the shit out of me?" *Lie.* The end of your cigarette glows with fury, your eyes showing a similar anger.

"I'm pretty sure we've discussed this. With the amount of stress

I've got between the move and your recent bouts of paranoia, you're lucky I'm not filling my veins with whatever I can find."

"I'd appreciate if you'd stop calling me paranoid. It makes me feel like a goddamned mental patient." My thoughts beg, yet my words wield daggers. It hurts me that I prefer arguing to sitting in silence. At least in fighting, we're acknowledging one another.

"Stop the car." Your voice is flat and cold, as if something has separated your voice from your heart.

I protest. I know that momentum is one of the only things keeping our relationship going at this point. The sultry saxophone-like timbre of your voice is gone, replaced with an icy knell.

"Robbie. Stop the car. I won't ask you again."

As I pull the car over, the click of the Taurus' blinker and slow whirl of brake-on-tire provide the soundtrack to the upcoming fight. You open the door and step into the frigid night. I wait for a car to pass, then climb out of the car and walk around to the shoulder. You're already sitting on the asphalt, a few brave tears sliding down your cheek.

"Look, I know this has been rough on you, but I'm trying to work it out. It's just a lot for me to handle!" I vent while standing a few feet from you.

Your eyes look up at me, but don't seem to see. One tear still clutches to the dimple in your left cheek. "A lot for you to handle. I bet. And was missing my grandmother's funeral too much for you to handle? And not visiting me in the hospital when I broke my leg, too much to handle as well?" The knell grows louder.

"I don't even know how you got to this, I was asking you about cigarettes and you jumped to this. This isn't even relevant!"

"Oh, this is completely relevant. You've just had too much going on in your life for me, and even this whole idea to move, you're just hoping to find some job or gig somewhere to keep you occupied so you don't have to be around me." You swallow hard, and add, "You know, I had a dream like this. You just had all of your little things to do with your life, and just kept looking at me like I was the only

thing that didn't fit your puzzle, like you just couldn't wait to get me out of your life."

You struggle to your feet and walk past me, brushing off my attempt to grab your hand. You walk into the middle of the empty expressway, then turn back to face me. A strange smirk curls your lip. "This is what you want, isn't it?" Your eyes turn and lock on a set of headlights in the distance.

The depth of detachment and complete lack of emotion in your voice roots me to the ground. I slump against the car and try to sift through my thoughts. My voice cracks as I mutter, "No, I just, I don't know how to deal with this." The knell sounds again, a deep and resonant tone in the back of my mind. The headlights get closer, taking the shape of a large semi truck.

"Then don't. That's been your course of action so far, and just look at how well it's working!" The knell morphs from a deep bell tone into a hollow horn, its pitch rising as the truck approaches. I see the silhouette of your body in the headlights.

"I... I loved you."

In a cacophony of blaring horns and screeching tires, my thoughts burst.

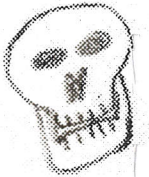
11:50 PM: My mind continues to race, digging through every file, folder and desk, trying to find one simple phrase or thought that brings peace to the night's chaos. Nothing seems to work the way it should.

In pacing my hotel room, I notice a small ashtray sitting on the end table next to a copy of Gideon's Bible. Floods of memories and thoughts threaten to drown my already frenzied mind as I lift the ashtray from the table. Stuck to the underside, I notice a happy little sticker with the universal sign for "No Smoking". Fucking wonderful. A useless metaphor for my useless life.

The window shatters, and the glass ashtray crumbles to the parking lot below.

YOU CAN'T FOOL THE TOOTH FAIRY

GORDON STEPHENS ++++&&\$+_____ =_ &&\$++++=_____



My young son, Gordon II affectionately known as Gee and my godson Raheem are three months apart in age. Around the time the boys were about five or six years old; they both began losing their teeth at an alarming rate. It seemed as if whenever I turned around one of them was showing me a gap toothed smile chortling about the "tooth fairy" coming to pay a visit. Needless to say the tooth fairy's pockets were becoming a tad bit lighter and their moods became brighter at each loss of their pearly whites. The boys viewed this as a new source of income to fill their coffers.

Presently a little Yorkshire terrier puppy by the name of Ju-Ju joined our male only bastion. Being just a puppy he did what puppies are wont to do and began gnawing on everything from my favorite slippers to the leather furniture. I went to the pet department store and selected what I thought would be an appropriate toy to gnaw on. I got him a chew toy that was formed like Garfield the cat. The boys thought it a hoot when Ju-Ju disdained my expensive bribe for more mundane tasty items such as belts and even wooden chair legs. Raheem the shorter but three month older and wiser of the two looked at me and sagely pronounced that perhaps I would have been better off purchasing a dog shaped toy instead of a cat shaped one. His younger, taller sidekick agreed as they eyed me as if I were a complete moron. With all the gnawing being done it was inevitable that Ju-Ju would begin to lose teeth as well. After much discussion between the boys they came to the conclusion that since Ju-Ju was still a puppy he was probably the same age as them. I'm not sure whose

idea it was but I became aware of a plot to fool the tooth fairy. There was a lot of whispering between them that ceased whenever I happened to be in earshot of their plans. By analyzing their cryptic questions I was able to deduce the gist of their nefarious scheme. They decided that by placing one of Ju-Ju's canines under their pillow, they would be able to extract more riches from the beleaguered tooth fairy. I looked at them askance, wondering where I had gone wrong in raising these two wanna-be hoaxers. I tried to discourage their unlawful tilt to no avail, since they were bound and determined to extract even more largesse from the benevolent tooth fairy. I pointed out to the boys that the tooth fairy was kinda like Santa Claus and everyone knew you can't fool him. My entreaties for them to abandon their scheme fell upon deaf ears. Raheem the smarter of the two pointed out that a tooth was a tooth and they weren't really fooling the tooth fairy since there was no rule that dogs couldn't put their teeth under their pillows. With logic like that I saw that I was faced with superior intellect and conceded. I gave up my tries for the redemption of their deceitful little souls. The only flaw in their little scheme was that Ju-Ju would not cooperate. It seemed as if he had gotten wind of their conspiracy and quickly stopped shedding teeth. They quickly began talking about locating all sorts of teeth to place under their pillows and in no time at all they would become "richer than rich", to use their term. My son Gee quickly squelched Raheem's idea of going out to where we boarded our horses. He pointed out that our mare, Booming June had nipped him on more than one occasion and he was leery of checking her out too close.

Besides he wisely pointed out, horse teeth are bigger than kid's teeth. Raheem had not been tasted by Booming June as of yet and I could tell that he didn't have a notion too. These guys might have been on a crooked path but no one could accuse them of being stupid.

One day as I passed the room, in which they were playing, I was greeted with silence. My mom hadn't raised any fools and these guys were my second set of children, the first having grown and flown the nest. I tip-toed over to the door that was slightly ajar and nudged it open. The door revealed a string tied to it with two little boys trying to attach the other end of the string to a supposedly loose tooth in the puppy's mouth. I shrieked and rescued Ju-Ju who seemed to be cooperating with the procedure. It was then that I admonished them that no strings, ropes, pliers, hammers, scissors or anything else was to be used for extraction purposes. I forbade them to use anything that wasn't natural. Thinking about whom I was dealing with, I told them under no uncertain terms, were they to assist with the pulling of anyone's teeth period. I heard Raheem telling Gee to follow him since they were going to excavate the compost heap. I guess he remembered that I had tossed fish heads in there from earlier fishing trips. Knowing Gee to be on the squeamish side, I paid scant attention to that undertaking. Sure enough they quickly abandoned that when Gee pointed out the fish heads would smell and be rotten.

I had several weeks of relative inactivity and all was quiet on the tooththing front. I thought that it had slipped under their radar and I breathed a sigh of relief for Ju-Ju. It wasn't too long after that, as I was pulling into the driveway the boys burst out of the front door brimming with glee. One look told me that Ju-Ju had betrayed me and sided with the boys. Sure enough he was dancing with glee on his hind legs as the boys happily showed me a tooth. From the looks of it, it did indeed look like a canine's tooth that had come to its demise naturally. I wound up and threw them my best Sandy Koufax curve ball. I asked who the tooth belonged to. For a moment there was stunned silence and then they both started talking until it reached a crescendo and I called a time out. I listened to both boys state their case for possession for the treasured item. Upon listening to both sides of the argument I rendered my decision and it was something that King Solomon would have been proud of: they would both share the tooth and any ill gotten booty. I saw the gleam come to both their eyes.

That night they willingly went to bed earlier than their customary hour. They had done the rock, paper, scissors routine and were safely ensconced in Gee's bottom bunk. Later when I checked on them I could have sworn I saw visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads as they slept the sleep of the innocent.

Around midnight the tooth fairy made his move. The tooth fairy had a Dickens of a time extracting the tooth from beneath the pillow. I guess both boys felt that there was no honor amongst thieves, since each had a good grip on either side of the pillow. It was a struggle getting their sweaty little palms from around the pillow to find the fraudulent offering but the tooth fairy was finally able to pull it off without waking the conniving duo. The fairy left the appropriate reward for both boys and lumbered off wearily, glad that his work was done.

The next morning at breakfast I noticed secret looks passing between the boys but nothing was said about the proceeds from the deceit purveyed upon the good fairy. Just as breakfast was about over I asked if the tooth fairy had made an appearance. Both boys looked at each other sheepishly and nodded their heads. When I inquired as to how much they had gotten, I was greeted with silence. Finally my godson spoke up in a timid voice and told me that I had been right: you cannot fool the tooth fairy. I asked why and before he could speak my son piped up and said: "Dog biscuits. Dad the tooth fairy left us dog biscuits". The price of two small dog biscuits? A few cents. The chagrined look on the faces of those two culprits? Priceless.

To this day I still have the dog tooth with my collection of baby teeth from the boys. Every now and then when the boys are up to mischief I admonish them with our newly minted family adage: "You can't fool the tooth fairy."

TUESDAY

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MAX WAGNER

A curious question was once asked to the woman: "Mommy, would you take a bullet for me?"

This was followed by a chiding chuckle, "No! Would you ever take one for me?" At least, the boy's question was answered honestly.

Nothing was ever her child's fault, nothing was ever her fault. If the boy called his deranged mother a "bitch", well, those were just the words of the neighbors next door. Gayle's duty as a parent was but to ensure that her children did not succumb to witchcraft or the government's brain-washing.

Gayle's success in those endeavors could never have been more absolute; she could protect her family from the subjugation of Carl's Plumbing, but she could not bring herself to pay the electric bill instead of purchasing an extravagant Oak television set. Yet, somehow, the boy wobbled down the street using his own force to propel the bicycle; somehow, the boy found himself reciting chants of the bunny ear method, as he crossed his laces for the first time; somehow the boy taught himself to look both ways. Somehow, the boy survived. For some reason, the boy survived.

Children in Ethiopia, they didn't survive—but they deserved to. Why did he—why did I survive—when I did not suffer as they did?

Skitzo-frenia....schizo?...Schizophrenia? Schizophrenia. Schizophrenic paranoia, perhaps. Possibly. Undoubtedly. Gayle

is schizophrenic. She sees the world, she sees the people, she sees in a way I do not. Paranoia: she thinks the thoughts for them, the thoughts that they do not have. She conjures motives and thoughts of others. She imagines – the government—it's evil, it wants her; they want us. They don't want us—but to her, they do. That old man sitting on the bench, he wants to embezzle her; he wants to steal her fourteen-foot trampoline. Gayle—mom—suffers from schizophrenic paranoia.

My classmates and friends—they do not understand. My mother drives them away. The parents always succumb the easiest; once the parents are afraid, they are sure to imbue their children with that same fear, that same discomfort.

"My sister said – don't get mad at me – but, my sister said," he studied his slick, black Adidas footwear, "she said your mom is paranoid."

Your sister is a bitch.

"I'm telling!"

It doesn't matter—it won't be my fault, anyways.

How could I do wrong? I am wrong, but I cannot commit wrong. Tears. Tears for what, for whom, why is my face moist? Paranoid, what does it mean, why is his sister a bitch? Paranoid—my mom



is paranoid; paranoid must be a negative—my mom is a negative. I know that—I know of the negatives. Why then, why tears? The front door swung open and slammed into the nearby oak television stand, wounding the expensive furniture. Furniture, vast amounts of furniture, a living room littered, saturated, and drowned with brown, leather La-Z-Boy's, flower decorated couches, and surreal landscape paintings. It is of great wonder that the television stand was able to occupy the meager remnants of space available. Wounding the furniture? It's just another notch—a record of incidents. Incoherent chanting echoed throughout the house as the kitchen counter took a beating from slammed groceries. What? Were the walls mocking her? Mind-games, maybe a few babies were playing mind-games with her at Meijer, maybe that's why she's having a fit.

Before the sun had yet to crawl out of bed, the son had faked sick to get out of school; a moan accompanied by a feigned stomach cramp offered salvation for a day. Waking up to the solace of summer, instead of the buzzing of the alarm clock was a good start.

With the assurance from her child of good behavior and remaining in bed the rest of the day, the mother had embarked on a perilous journey to scavenge for food. The local churches and Salvation Army offered weekly pickups for free groceries. Yet, signatures were required; signatures to authenticate the only-once-a-week policy. Somehow, the mother always created a grand scene, a fit rivaling that of a spoiled child being denied candy for the first time. The volunteers would concede and give her the nonperishable groceries. That was their routine.

The door leading to the garage slammed shut—the son pulled his ear away from his bedroom door. Babylon, Babylon and my conquest will be complete. Still wary of a potential trap, the son slowly opened his bedroom door; a surgeon performing—the creaking hinges did not creak. With the door halfway open—the son listened. He had become quite the huntsman in his virtual reality. The skills of patience and the twitching of his ears in anticipation, those could only be learned in the Great Elder's Forest. Nothing. Labored breathing did not ominously creep into his ears; the sound of paper on pen did not permeate throughout the house; the cupboards did not slam, crash, and bang. Seven more chariots, and I should have enough to defeat the Babylonian

army. That was his routine.

The mother coasted into the driveway at 4:04 p.m. She had noticed her neighbors across the street as her car snuck by them; there they played, laughter resonating as the father played with his toddler and the mother cradled the newborn.

The son had just finished his Egyptian campaign, with Babylon's peasants and legions left in a bloody river, the conqueror decided to venture out to the living room—Toonami was on Cartoon Network. Still mindful of his premised sickness, the boy dragged along his blanket—it was capable of covering an elephant—or at least, it felt like it, as it dragged behind him like the tail of a wedding dress. The son turned on the television. Donate one cent a day, and save a child's life? The man speaking was cut off by a train—further providing evidence of the disparity and hopelessness of the destitute children; the commercial ended with the bald man sitting behind a group of children—their frail arms and legs a sharp contrast to the pouch that was their belly. Why are they all starving if so little money can do so much? The commercial ended, and the mandatory four o'clock Dragonball Z (part of Toonami's lineup) episode was flashing on the screen.

Seconds after the gear shifted to "park", the car door was thrown open—the force caused recoil and it slammed back into the already-enraged woman as she tried to claw out of the malevolent door.

The son heard his mother pull up in the driveway; utilizing his honed abilities, from years of feigning sickness, he hastily turned off the television and the remote almost simultaneously glided across the room to a flower-decorated couch. He looked outside the window and saw his mother storming down the driveway, towards the street. What the hell—oh no, please, please, don't freak out—oh, God. Why?

The enraged, deranged mother took great strides as her mania forced her down the driveway. A picturesque scene, the neighbors were arranged perfectly: the father was crouched down, leaning on his toes—his arms stretched wide as he waited to embrace the toddler stumbling towards him; the neighbor-mother, statuesque behind the father's shoulder—she was engaged with the ten pound clump of cloth in her arms, counting and prodding her infant's

fingers and toes. The mother-grotesque entered the scene, and war she waged.

Windows seemed to vibrate, the son could hear the distorted shriek that shot from his mother's lungs.

Both hands formed fists and rested at her sides, as her blue dress—with white polka dots—bucked and neighed, trying to escape on the currents of a sudden breeze. Gayle's nostrils flared and her eyes suddenly widened.

The boy watched as Gayle flung her arms in a wild frenzy—howling out obscenities, thrashing and pointing at irregularities, and laughing at falsities. Has my school bus already gone by? I hope Brian's parents don't drive by; why can't she just come in the house, I'd rather just deal with her now—this is unfair. Finally, after realizing that it was their cue to leave, the boy watched as the neighbors scampered back to their home—back to the indoors—back to the normal.

Gayle did a 180 degree turn on her heel and stomped towards her car.

All of this, started by my selfish, whiny desire to stay home and play video games? Not babies at Meijer, maybe the happy couple across the street—maybe that triggered her.

Another slammed cupboard reverberated throughout the house. The mumbled incantations that had filled the house walls before, were now replaced by more audible and English-friendly words, "Why are there pine needles in my driveway? Did the neighbors put those there? If they have time to sit outside of their house and assault my son, they have time to destroy my driveway!" Gayle's rants were interrupted by her maniacal screech.

The son covered his ears—but it didn't help.

The schizophrenic picked up her tirade, "Why were they happy? Are they plotting to steal my uterus? EVERYONE is SICK!"

All because I was selfish and stayed home from school—I deserve this.

Gayle tore through the living room—reminiscent of Taz from Looney Toons—paintings became floor décor and arm rests became floor mats. She found the television, she turned it on to FOX News—Bill O'Reilly was discussing the affects of Insane Clown Posse's music on "today's youth"; Gayle towered over the television, hands on hips, she waited for the political commentator to submit to her authority. After Bill did not yield, Gayle made an inane face—tongue sticking out and eyes squeezed shut; this was promptly followed by repeated spitting.

As Bill drowned in saliva, the boy's mother lectured the television, "I am not a criminal. I have rights."

Schizophrenic paranoia does not only affect one person. Gayle is schizophrenic, mom is paranoid. My brother bears the same wounds as I; my mother creates great self-afflictions, more agony than my brother or I can imagine. To witness her children renounce her sanity—that is a pain. Maybe, maybe her mental illness is able to shield her from these truths—these pains. Perhaps, perhaps a tapestry of vindication was woven to protect her fragile mind; the remnants of her sanity—could it sustain a complete upheaval of her world? Did her mental illness arise and evolve out of a need for protection of the self—the mind?

"Max, did you use a curse word to describe Eric's sister?"

...

"Answer me—you know what, actually, go to the Principal's office, now!"

I don't think that will work, Ms. Cobbs.

How could Eric understand his sister is a bitch, if I don't know what being paranoid means? I don't know why—but, I felt the need to retaliate at Eric, to defend my mother—even if I didn't know what paranoid meant.

I can't even understand why my life is so easy compared to others: I cannot comprehend the pain and misery that others must go through: drunken parents, physical and mental abuse—hunger. Why am I such a self-pitying child? I feel as if I am the center of the universe, as if my needs are important—but they aren't.



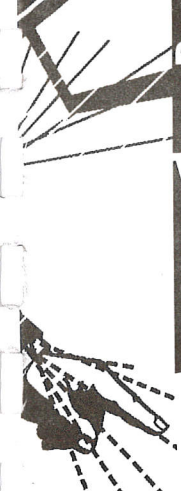


Maybe, I could toss a pebble into time's soothing waters and create a ripple; maybe, that ripple would someday become a thunderous wave.

Maybe, I could receive a "normal" childhood, yet, retain my accumulated wisdom and knowledge—that would be the ultimate salvation; however, part of growing up with Gayle was the realization that hoping for impossibilities, dreaming improbabilities, and conquering impracticalities are naïve fantasies.

A curious question was once asked to the boy: "Max, you won't ever leave me, will you?"

This was followed by a chiding chuckle, "Of course I will, I hate you." At least, the boy answered the question honestly.



"OF COURSE
WILL, I HATE YOU"

BREAST CANCER



MICHELE KOGLIN

I should be singing while dancing on toes
Right now
Leaping and criss-crossing the room.
The lady on TV announced the news
Right now
My family just won ten million smack-a roes.

So much money, still I don't dance
Right now
No shiny things I could be shopping for.
Money we owe to lenders and friends
Right now
Can be paid in currency, yes, cash for sure.

My family is taken care of, no more tears
Right now
The life of luxury resides.
Cutest clothes, shiny shoes, fancy cars
Right now
The large back yard with jungle gym produces laughing eyes.

Finest foods and Kool-aid served on a silver platter
Right now
A sign of some answered prayers.
No more doctors, hospitals, or funeral homes
Right now
I believe the good Lord cares.

My husband clenches the winning ticket
Right now
Not knowing to laugh or cry.
I look down from the sky of heavens
Right now
As he questions why I had to die.

They know that I can rest peacefully
Right now
No more anger, nor questions, I am sure.
I walk through the towering golden gates
Right now
Still, Breast Cancer needs a cure.

CIDER MILL

MICHELE KOGLIN

Ah, quaint little shop
With shelves of solid oak
That surround the walls to hide the gray tones
Of Cinderblock.

Tables are dressed
In old lace doilies
Changing to faded sun-dried yellow
From once bright white
Like a fresh set of pearls.

No trace of dust on floors, nor fixtures.
As the sunshine peers through stained glass windows.
The squeaky ceiling fan dances,
Spinning its wobbling blades
Like the propellers of an old ghost ship.

The aroma of sweet autumn
Fills the air
In this tiny cafe
Where people stop to inspect
All who enter through the fly-stopping screened door.
Upon its slamming shut,
Patrons return to sipping on cider from their fake chinaware
And nibbling cinnamon donut holes.

GOLDEN HEART

MICHELE KOGLIN

My dear husband
I have scorned you with such sour words
Today.
Though you love me with your heart
Unconditionally...
You truly have a heart of a solid golden pineapple,
To forgive my juvenile behavior yet
Once again.
I must ask,
Are you a descendent of King Midas,
To possess such a golden heart?
Your reply softens my pursed lips...
"Why would I take my car to Midas?"

)) MICHELE KOGLIN (((

PHOTOGRAPHS IN MY GLOVE BOX

TODD RUNGE

I found them today looking for
something,
there they were:
photographs I took
on a rooftop
in Brooklyn.

I had your dad's old Pentax
taking
long exposures,
first of the brick walls
and the empty
windows,
then of the Brooklyn-Queens
Expressway—
the cars
developed into yellow and red
ribbons of wire.

of course the photographs
made
me
think of you.

and me
on a rooftop in Brooklyn
by myself with
bottles of
beer
and my eye through a camera
lens.

drunk
on a rooftop
in Brooklyn
with all of those
captured lights streaming,
drunk and in
love
in the night air
on a rooftop in Brooklyn.

I told you about the feral cats
in the vacant lot
next to the building,
the building

with the rooftop
I was on,
there were many
of them
living out their cat nights
down there in the
vacant lot
but I didn't
take any
photographs
of them.

writing this now
I think
probably
I will find this poem
someday,
looking for something,
and of course it will
make me
think
of you.

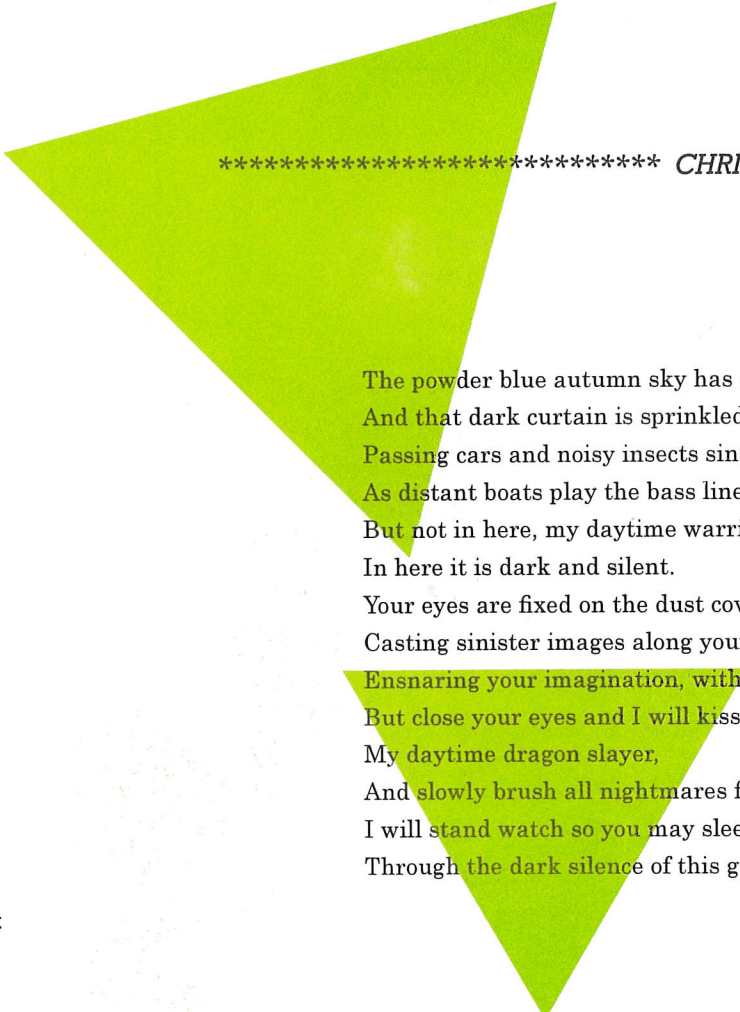
and me
on a desktop in my bedroom
alone
with a bottle of wine
capturing
all of these
streaming
lights.





GOODNIGHT

***** CHRISTINE DAY *****



The powder blue autumn sky has succumbed to its deep royal counterpart,
And that dark curtain is sprinkled with the light of a million stars.
Passing cars and noisy insects sing their evening song
As distant boats play the bass line with their horns.
But not in here, my daytime warrior, where you rest your head,
In here it is dark and silent.
Your eyes are fixed on the dust covered blades
Casting sinister images along your walls,
Ensnaring your imagination, with thoughts of unstoppable fear.
But close your eyes and I will kiss you
My daytime dragon slayer,
And slowly brush all nightmares from your mind.
I will stand watch so you may sleep
Through the dark silence of this good night.



EATING HALLUCINOGENIC MUSHROOMS AND HIKING WITH FRIENDS IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTS.

TODD RUNGE

the river swirled
and rushed by us.
I swilled some water
to ease the eruptions down there.
it helped.

whoosh and everything,
you can't escape the river noise.
I still felt nausea.
it comes with the territory.

we had been seated
under some low green brush
by the river off the trail
passing a pipe.

we moved on upstream
and found a waterfall.
all that water.
and the sound it made.
the vomit feeling was imminent
but I kept walking
and thinking.

we jumped some rocks
to a little island in the river.
it was overgrown.

we cracked some Busch beers
to take the edge off.
it helped.

we checked the map.
well, we just kind of stared
at it with goofy childish eyes.
we were seeing all of this
like little kids—
frightening but wonderful.

I lit a smoke.
kids don't smoke.

FLYING

NIKKI ROULO

We are a pendulum
Broken to the hour,
An allegro.
The ground below,
A spray of colors,
That traps some with fear,
Pinning their wings forever—
They will never know.
The wind is a wall that must be broken,
While soaring by,
Or it breaks us.
Its anger spinning,
Bringing with it leaf ash and pine.
Arpeggio, crescendo, legato, staccato
Of hooves.



TO THE WOMAN I IMAGINED WHILE ASLEEP LAST NIGHT

TODD RUNGE

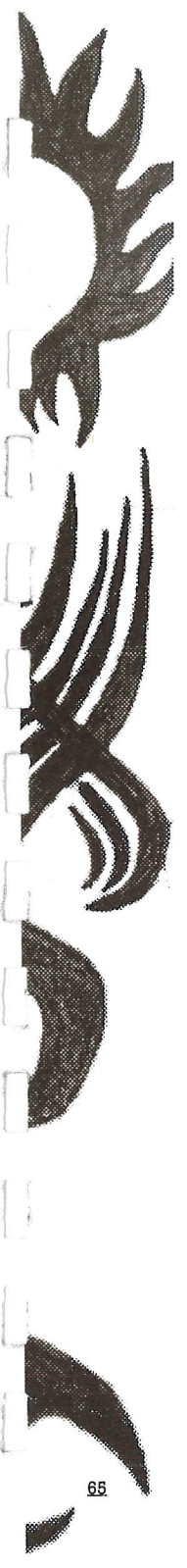
I'm sorry I smashed that
ping-pong table.
it broke easily
and really hurt
when I hit the ground.

I didn't know what
else to do.
I saw you there
in the basement.
you looked at me
before we started dancing.
at first close
then almost running.
around the furnace
past the wet socks.
I couldn't keep up.
I can't dance well
so I jumped on the table.
it was immature
I know.

I couldn't move
and just lay on the
ruins.
you came over.
stood over my head
and kissed me upside-down
on my mouth.

thank you
for understanding.





MORNING FREIHEIT

NIKKI ROULO

The air is a slap of cold comprehension.
Each jolting vibration from the cement driveway—
The only escape from the house.
The key languidly turns in revolution
And the familiar gloom greets me,
Contrast to the frost latticed bricks;
A soft rustle of dry grass ricochets
Softer than the earlier word war.
The spigot handle creaks with arthritis,
Pausing in remembrance before a spitting avalanche
Of clear burning embers
That glues shaking hands to bucket handles.
Cherry red fingers slid underneath the mane,
A soft snort and a shower of hay.

FAMILY



CHRISTINE DAY

Filled with nutmeg and cinnamon scent
Giggles and little feet running over head
Laughing, humming, clicking flatware and plates.

Heat bellows from the hearth and stove,
And hearts and sweaters, and hugs.
Sitting together to eat and talk
All is well, warm, unfamiliar.

Pleasantries turn passive, dismissive.
Feelings long suppressed, or quietly mentioned under the breath
Bubble and boil and simmer in the gravy boat.

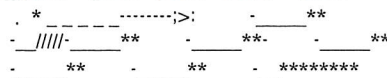
Irritations burn into silent anger
Noticed only in a sideways sarcastic glance.
The turkey is dry, the brother is stubborn
The uncle's new wife is controlling, the cranberry sauce doesn't look like a can.

Tensing, stressing, tip toeing through the overstocked china shop that is this gathering.
Thankful that no one discusses the obvious confrontations they are running through their minds.
The kids only eat rolls, they scream, cry, wrestle away from their seats.

Pie is served, but the family is full,
Full of stuffing and turkey, and resentment.
Shoes, coats, and pretend smiles of familial caring are put on to leave.
Hesitant hugs jingle expectant keys.

Close the door, start the car, recap the ridiculous.
Happy Thanksgiving, Happy Holidays, see you in a year.

STIGMATA



DON LIERMAN

Baby cries in the night
Baby I never had
bottle schemed all that
Angel sang

sleep along
go to work
live in fear
of evermore

the rustling of the autumn leaves
blowing slivers from the shroud across
the scattered straw

it was so bright once
this babbling Brigadoon
this languid promised land

such dry deluded dreams
not being alone
nor bloodied gums deep

in Bourbon memories
of those I cared about
Alpha cry Omega

now broken
not dead
dragged naked
through polystyrene

o fallow youth
that burn both edges
way too fast

into the night
her face recedes
the baby cries
and I'm too damaged
to caress
the wounded child

FORCED SMILE



KRYSTEN ALLEN

Was that wicker chair stiff?
Or that sweater too hot?
Your eyes are glazed over,
And you have that forced smile.

Your lips tighten up,
to a straight line.
Your eyes look blank,
almost like, you are not alive.

They say I look like you,
I have your nose,
big as it may be.
And your puffy cheeks.

But the one thing I hate,
that I know came from you.
Is that smile
Forced in a lie.

We use it at parties
we don't want to go too.
We use it in public
to deny the truth.

I think, we use it to ourselves
to deny the fighting.
The bickering about
my choices I choose.

My choice in college
is my own.
My choice in lover
is my own.

The smile lies to me,
with tenuous hope.
It fills me with doubt,
with fakeness I never want.

Why did you give me this curse?
This smile that can't fill a void.
I'm beginning to lose myself,
becoming an empty shell.

And though I know this,
I can't stop.
The small creases on my mouth
begin to rise.

I still use that smile too.
I use it,
to please,
you.

MOJO CHIME



DON LIERMAN

How they wore him down

Purple puddings on the brow

Red rosy etchings to mark the day

Dead children blaze across the night

Torn the beak the chick doth sigh

Where is the moment of the pen?

Curt were the word before the Lie

Of brother bowing blowing spunks

Ascertain the knob-kneed crow

I ain't your bitch no more

The wandering witch he would not be

Lemon-crushed rocks withered wings

Noble for what or cum to naught

Quite savage is the hardened sword

That teaches love at the point of lust

Clutching tightly away the descent of Night

How furry is the maidenhead

Rutting doth free the ancient curse

Lie dead



LOGIC AND CHEESE

MAX WAGNER

Jack and Jane each wrote a story,
Mrs. Teacher prepared her red ink.

Jane imagined a princess, a wizard, and a tower,
Jack conceived penguins, cheese, and igloos.

A beautiful princess, envied by all,
A wizard, passionately seeking lust,
Rejected, he locks her in the tower to wither,
The silk-plucked golden locks that have driven him mad.

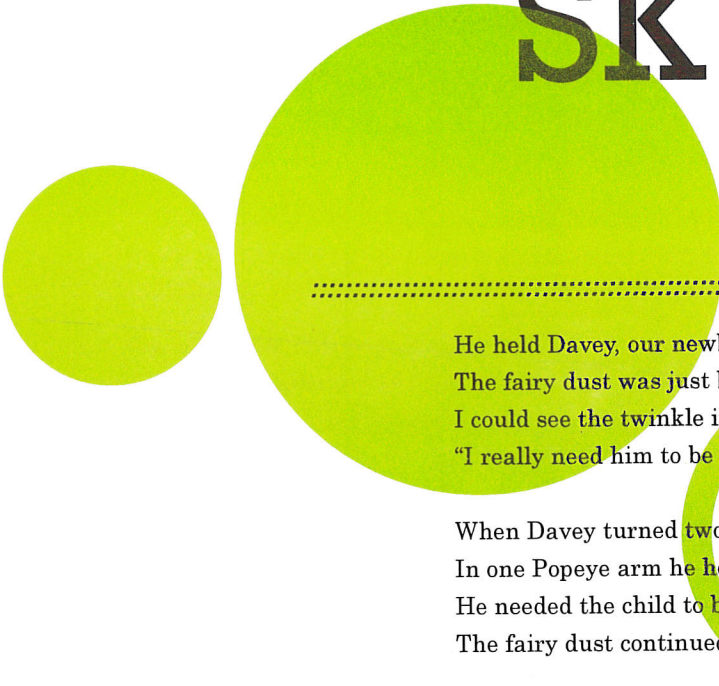
Penguins, servants of Master Santa,
His presents are products of
Those foolish enough to enter the cheese igloos;
In waddles their captors—and Santa gains more “elves”.

Oh, but the fair maiden's heart was pure,
Her gold-laced arteries pumped her distress to the gods above,
A knight with lion-crested shield and dragon-bane spear,
Answers the call and strikes down the malevolent wizard.

One old man defies the tuxedo-bodied servants,
His companion black-sheep was felled early and turned to stew for Santa,
Yet, his frail body could not resist the onslaught of the birds,
He became shackled and shamed into the workshop for the Master.

Mrs. Teacher's pen waltzed across Jane's creation,
Mrs. Teacher's pen marched through Jack's world,

Jane received an A for her story,
Jack did not.
Jack wondered why,
Jane did not.



SKY BLUE

.....: NANCY COATES :.....

He held Davey, our newborn grandson, in his Popeye arms.
The fairy dust was just beginning to fall, then.
I could see the twinkle in his sky blue eyes and the invisible anchor tattooed on his bicep.
"I really need him to be a boy," he'd told me just after our daughter gave us the happy news.

When Davey turned two, they changed a tire together.
In one Popeye arm he held a tire iron; with the other he anchored Davey still.
He needed the child to be a boy so that they could change tires, I suppose.
The fairy dust continued to fall.

Later, I placed our granddaughter, Becky,
a little rosebud, into his Popeye arms, nearly transparent now,
except for the tattoo.
She slept sweetly under the gaze of his sky blue eyes.

By the time we danced,
the living room was filled with fairy dust.
He held me the only way that bones and fairy dust can,
padding through the fairy dust together,
his feet shuffling,
my feet following.
It was blue,
the dust I mean,
sky blue.

FOREST-FIRE



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ALEXANDER MEYER

Trial and error.
An idea forms branches,
becomes a timeline,
showing many possible outcomes.
The highest of highs,
the deepest of lows all accounted for.
The road splits.
The tree forks.
The lightning of your storm bursts the branches
and engulfs goals and ideas in cleansing flame.
In this light, black and tainted roots are revealed.
Dreams lined with thorns.
Inhuman actions laid bare for the world to see.
The ground is fertile now.
New forests grow easily.
A new season is here.

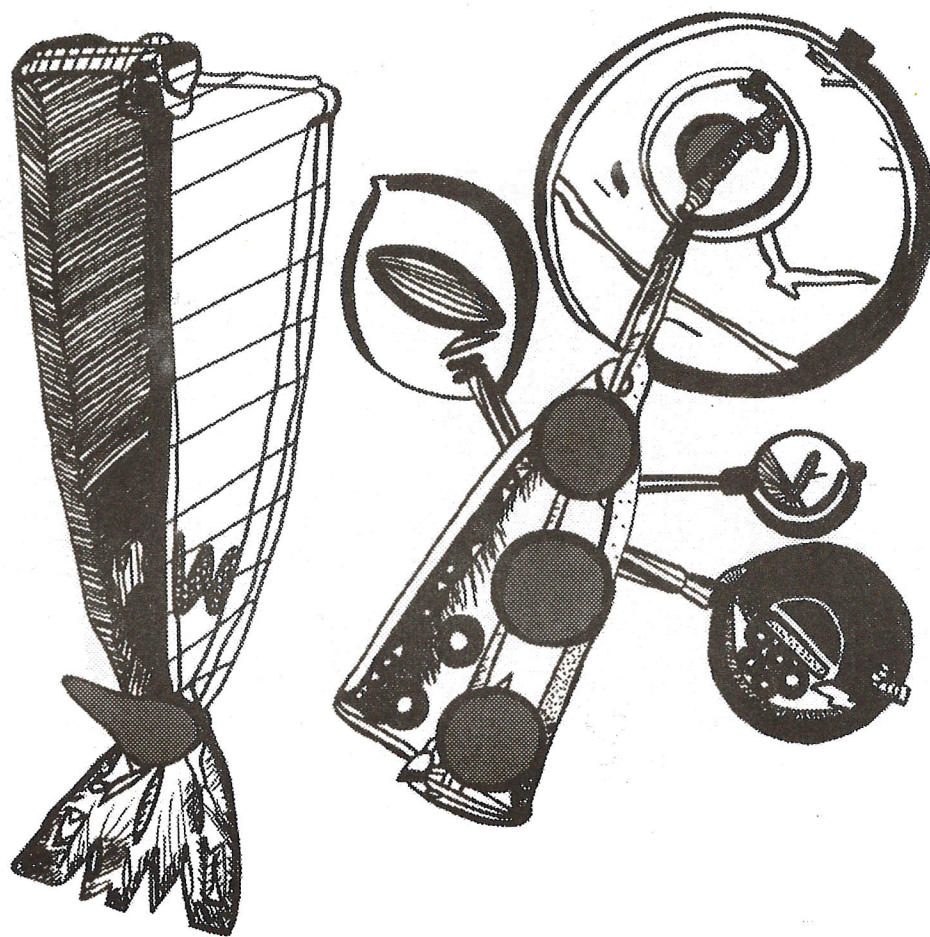
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merit

EYE

ROSE KING



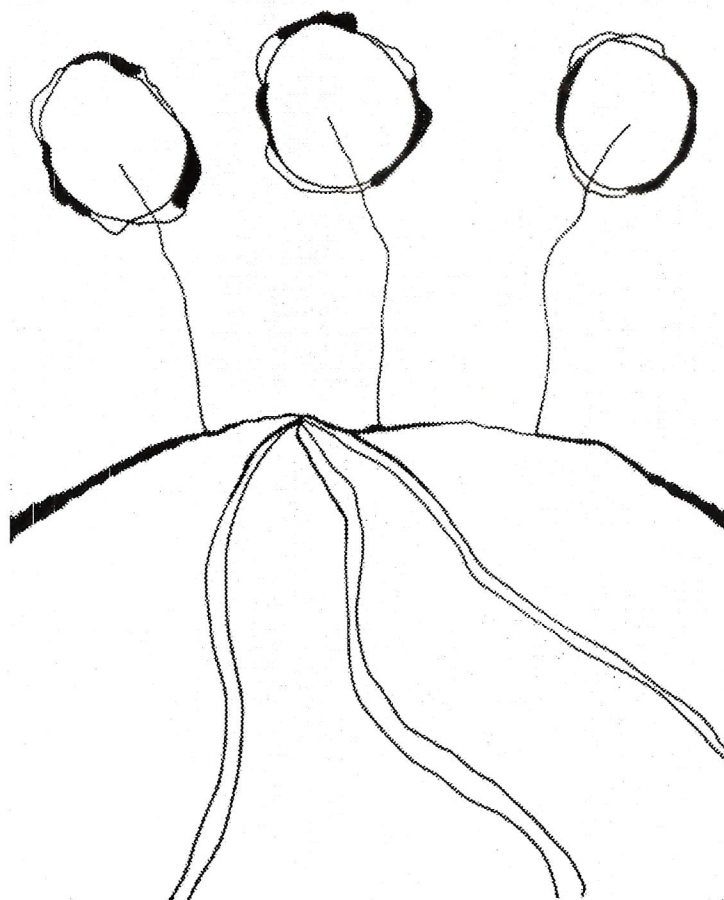
EYE

ROSE KING



TRIO HILL

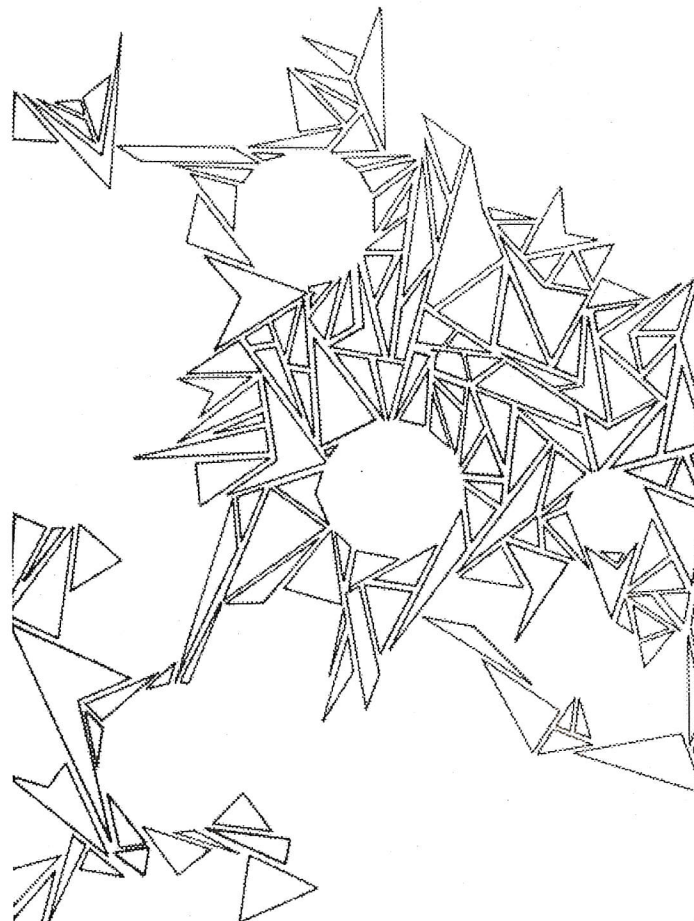
ROSE KING



EXTRAPOLATE

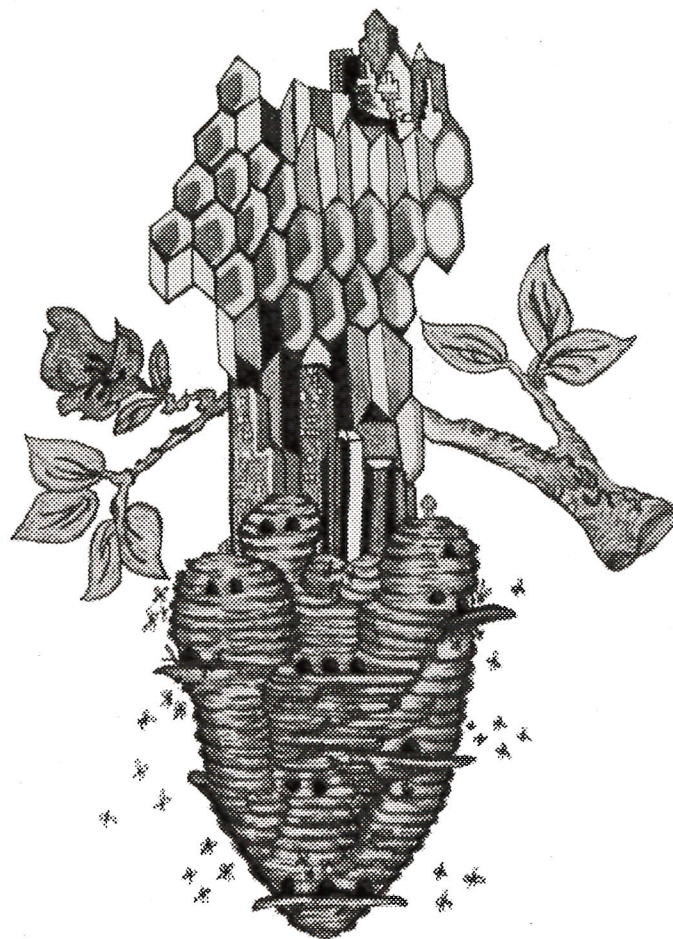
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JUSTIN LINNE



SWEET CITY

THERESE PADGHAM



THE “ME” VASE

DIANE PAULI



CHAMPY THE LAKE CHAMPLAIN MONSTER

KAREN PETERSON



LOVE 2009

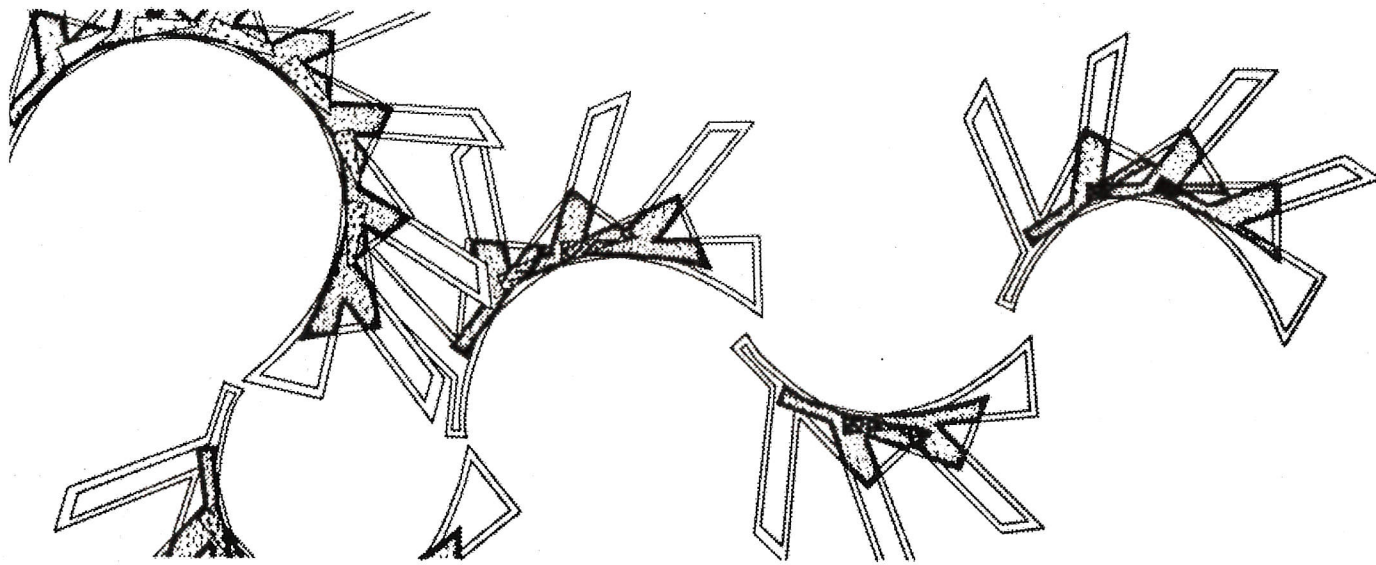
TWANA PINSKEY



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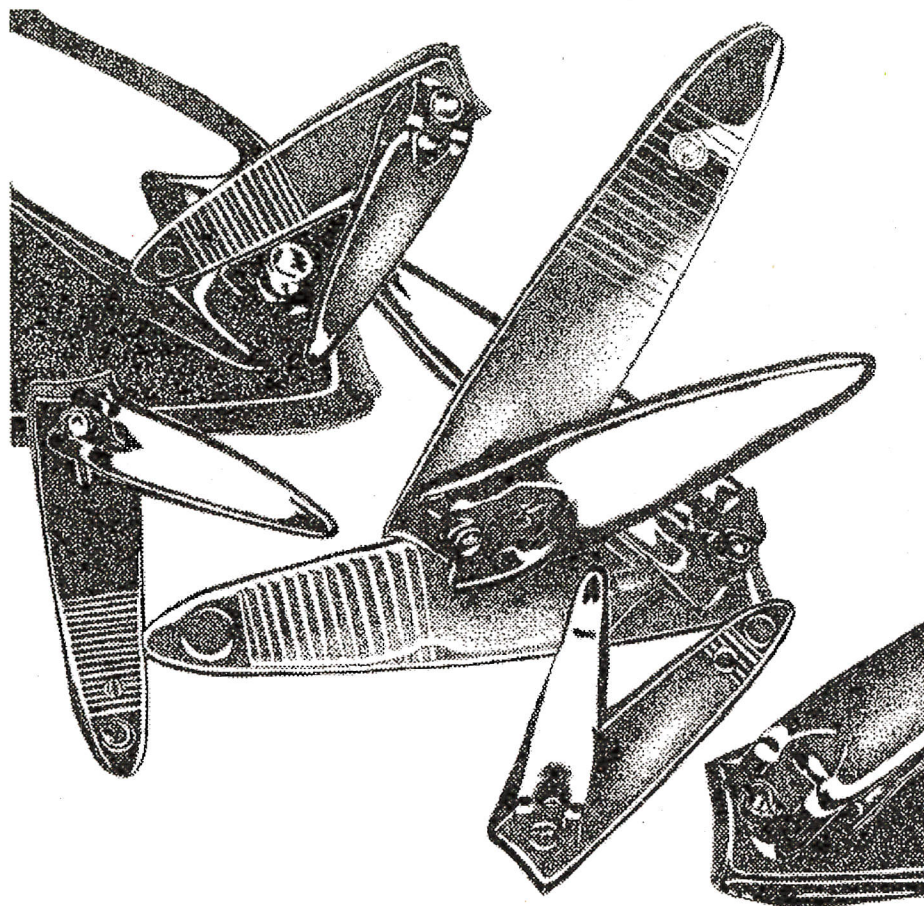
POLYGONAL EMISSION

JOSÉ SANCHEZ



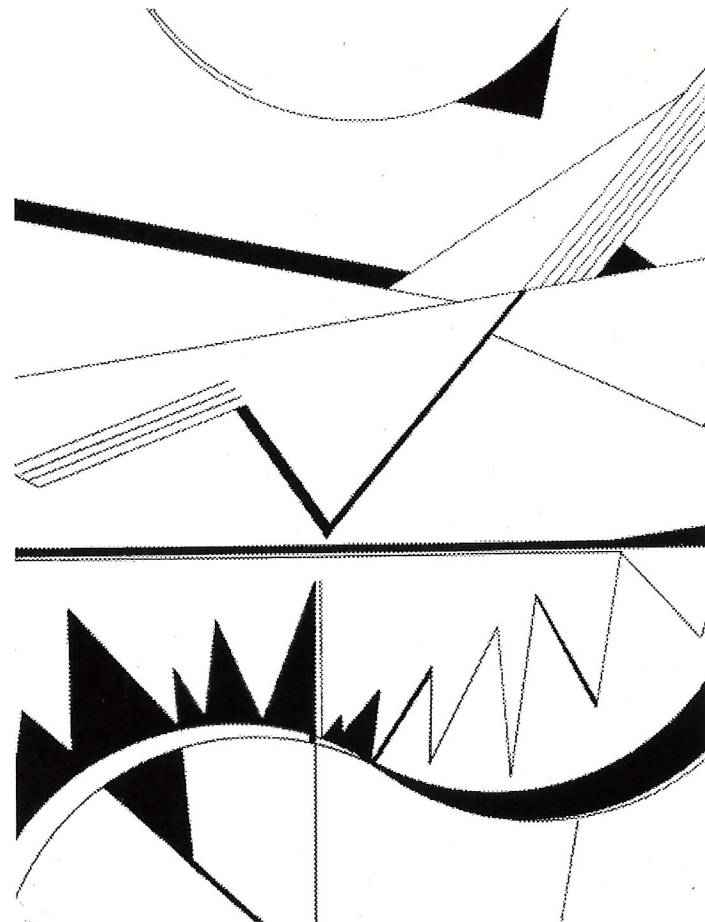
CLIP N DOTS

ESTELLE SCHEAFFER



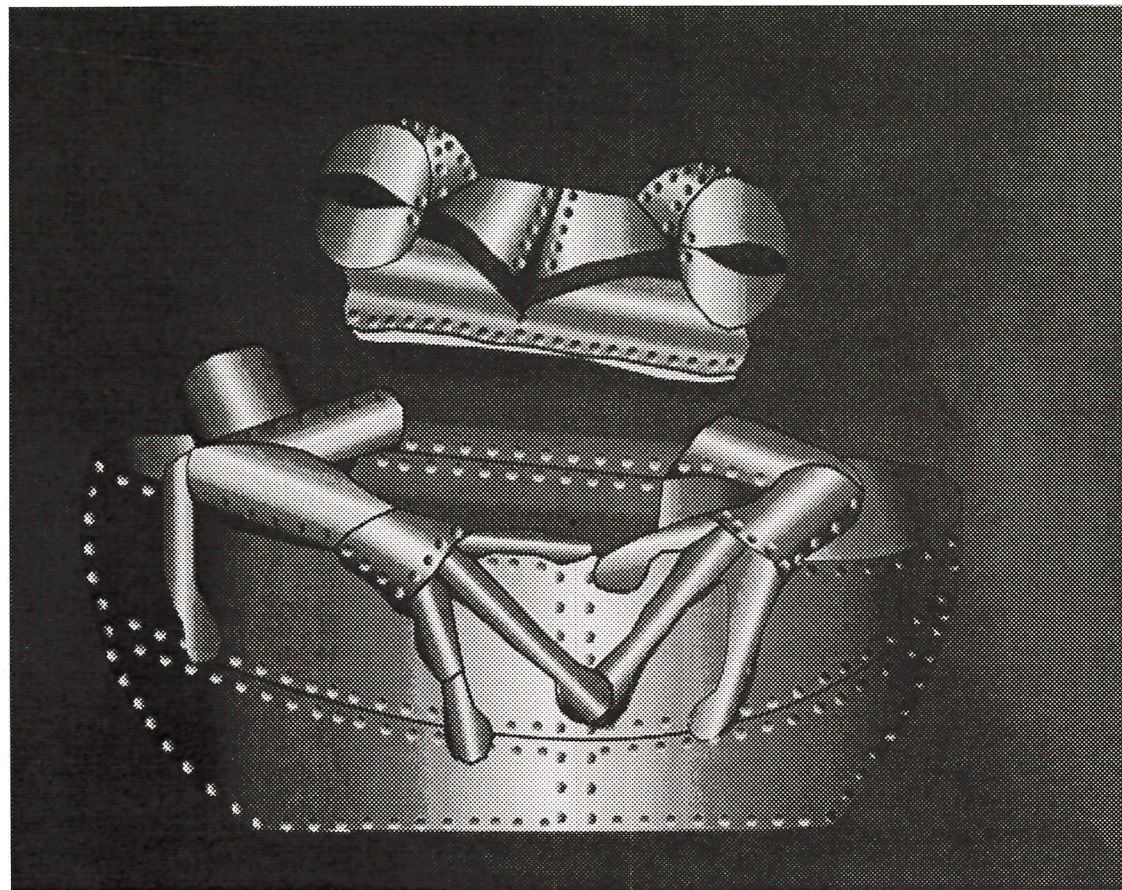
MEUS LEVAMENTUM MEUS VIRES

GARRISON SMITH



ROBOT FROG

KAYLA SULLIVAN



THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE

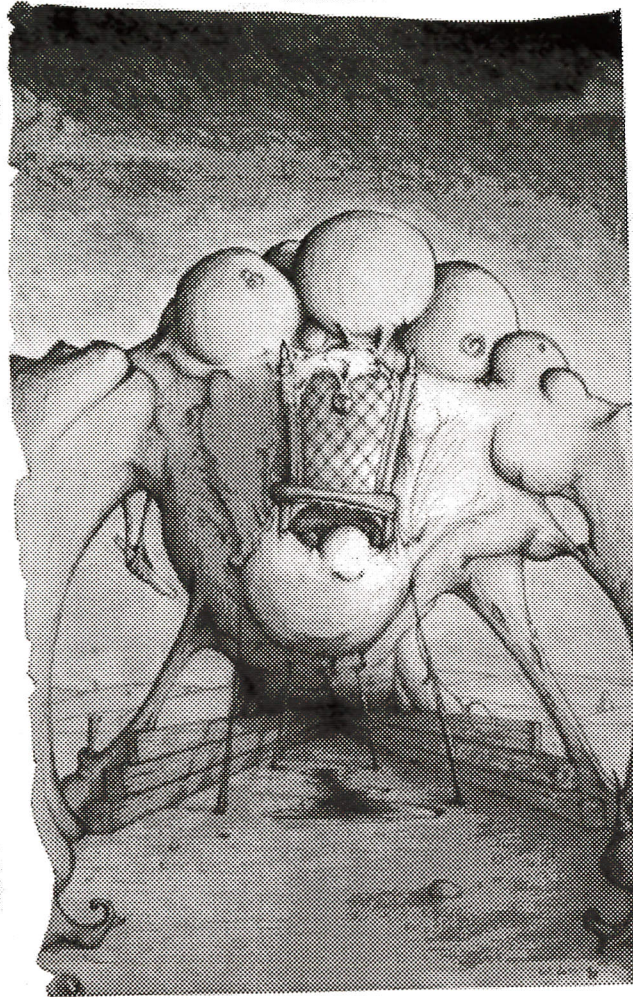
BETHANY WOLF



COLLECTED THINGS

KURT NELSON

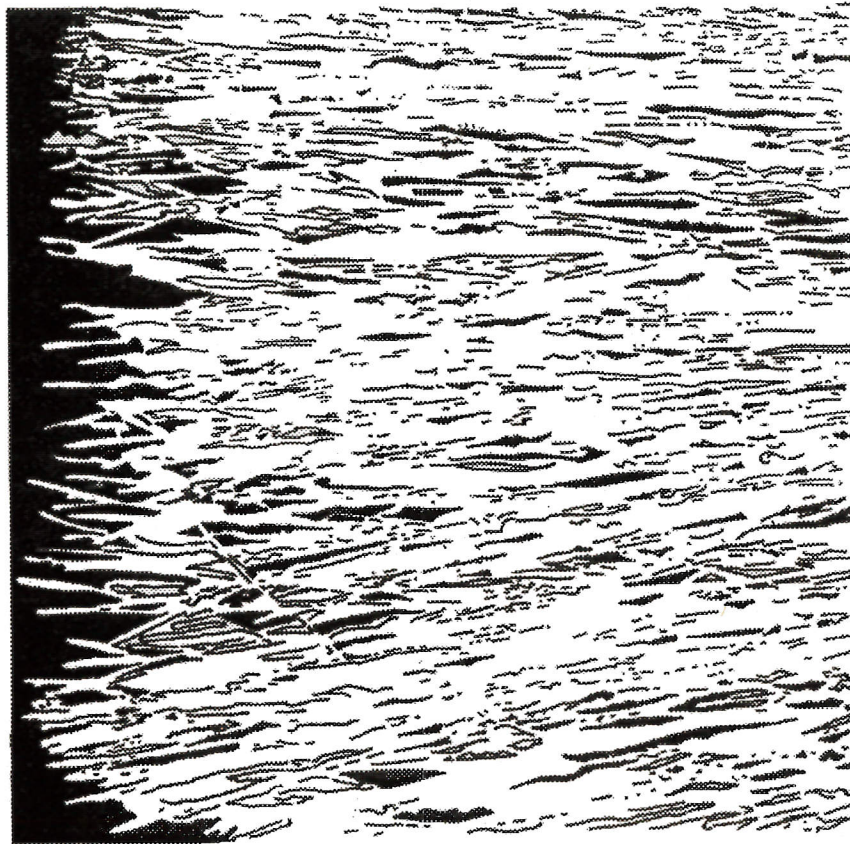
HONORABLE MENTION



SHAVING HISTORY 1

ERICH GODINEZ

HONORABLE MENTION



SHAVING HISTORY 2

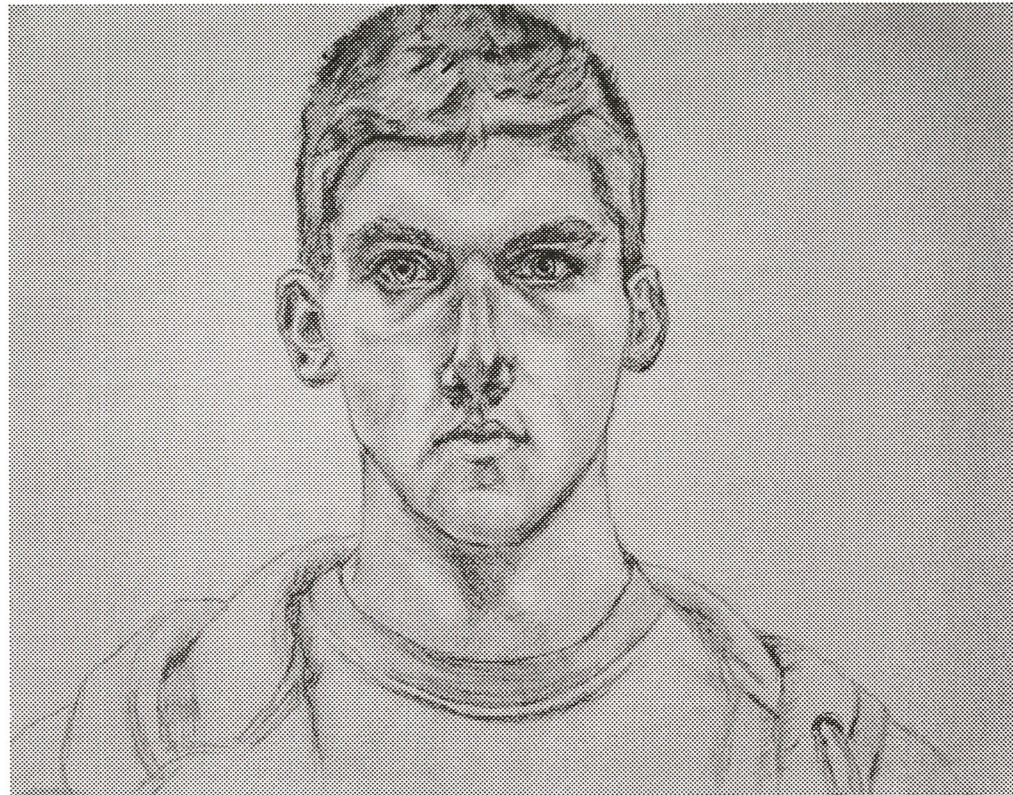
ERICH GODINEZ

HONORABLE MENTION



UNTITLED

JOSH SHEPARD



SILK STRIPS

HOLLY BERNARD

*-----> *
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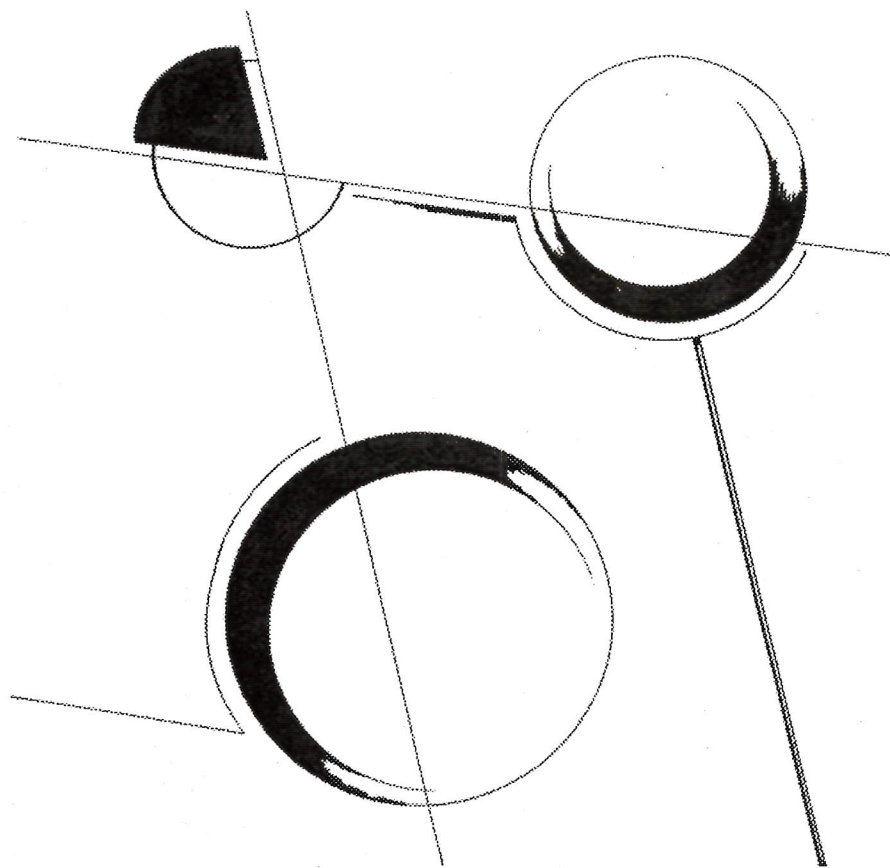
ILLUMINATED SKELETON

BRITTNY BIERNOT



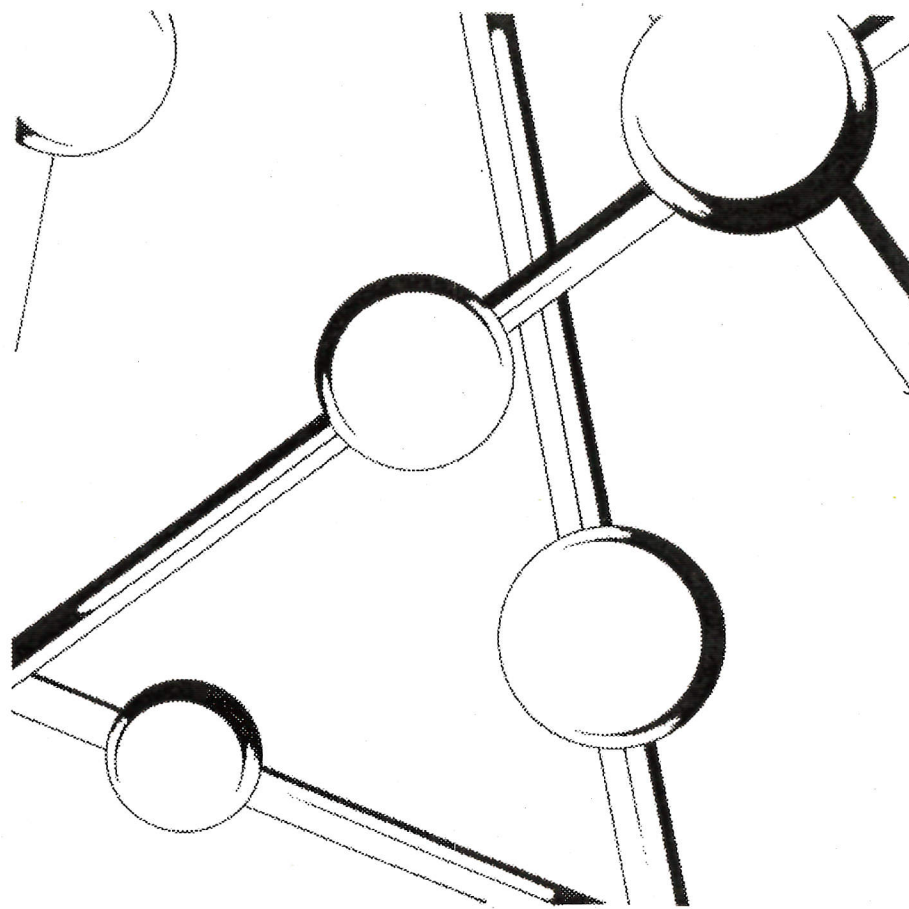
CIRCLE SERIES

DAVID DEFRANE



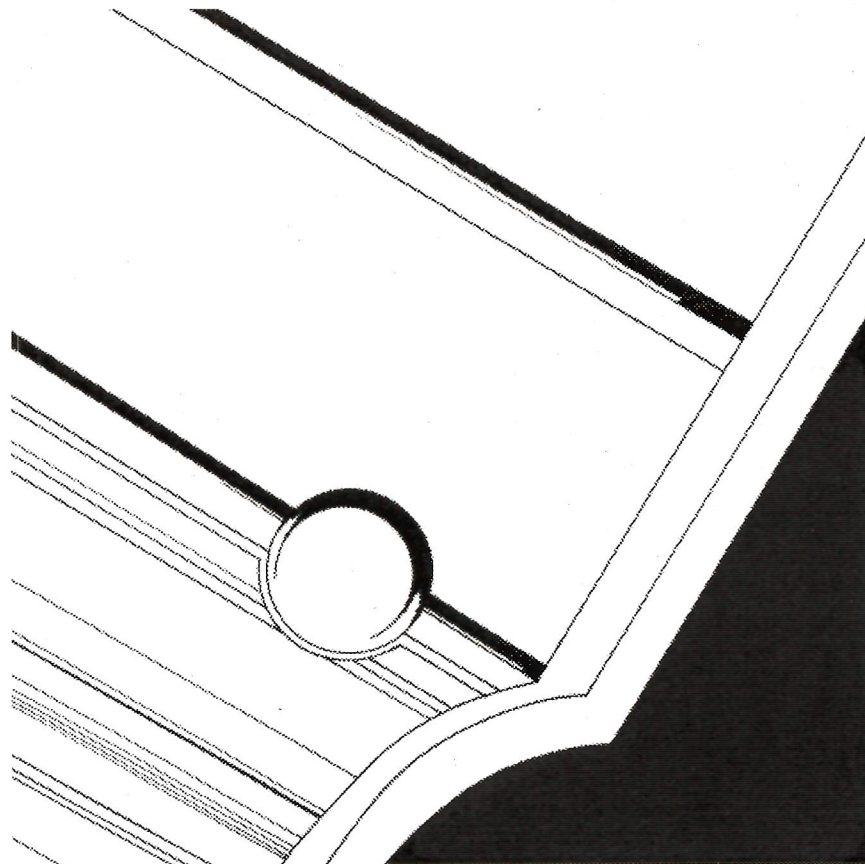
CIRCLE SERIES

DAVID DEFRANE



CIRCLE SERIES

DAVID DEFRANE



SCIENCE AND MADNESS

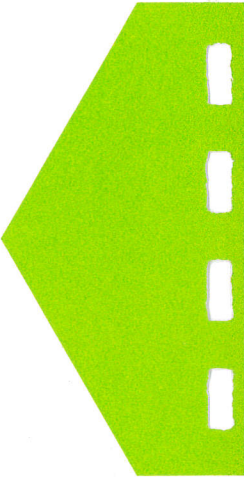
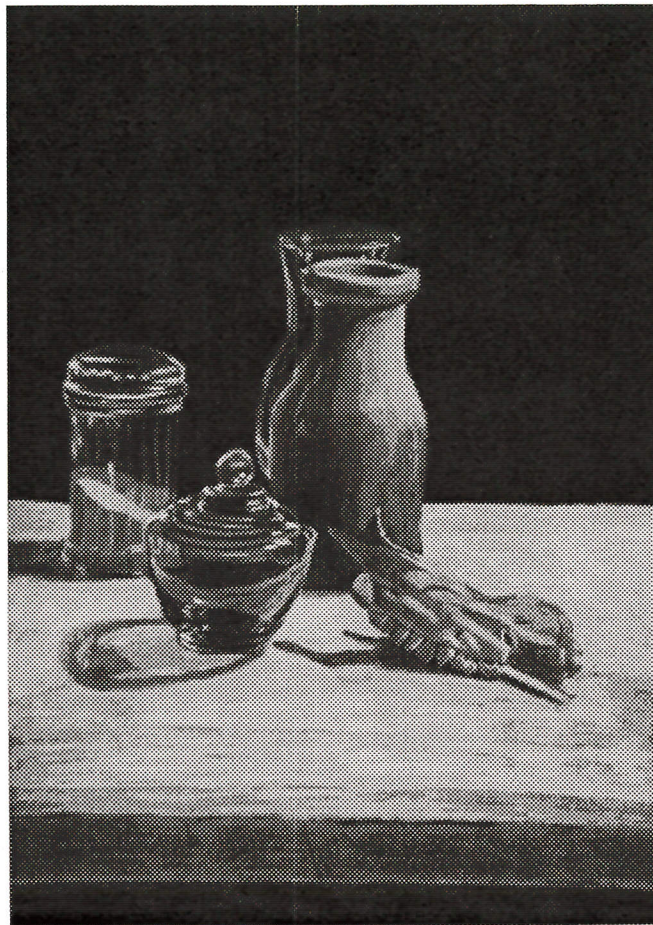
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V: - ** - // - **
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LAUREN CROSS



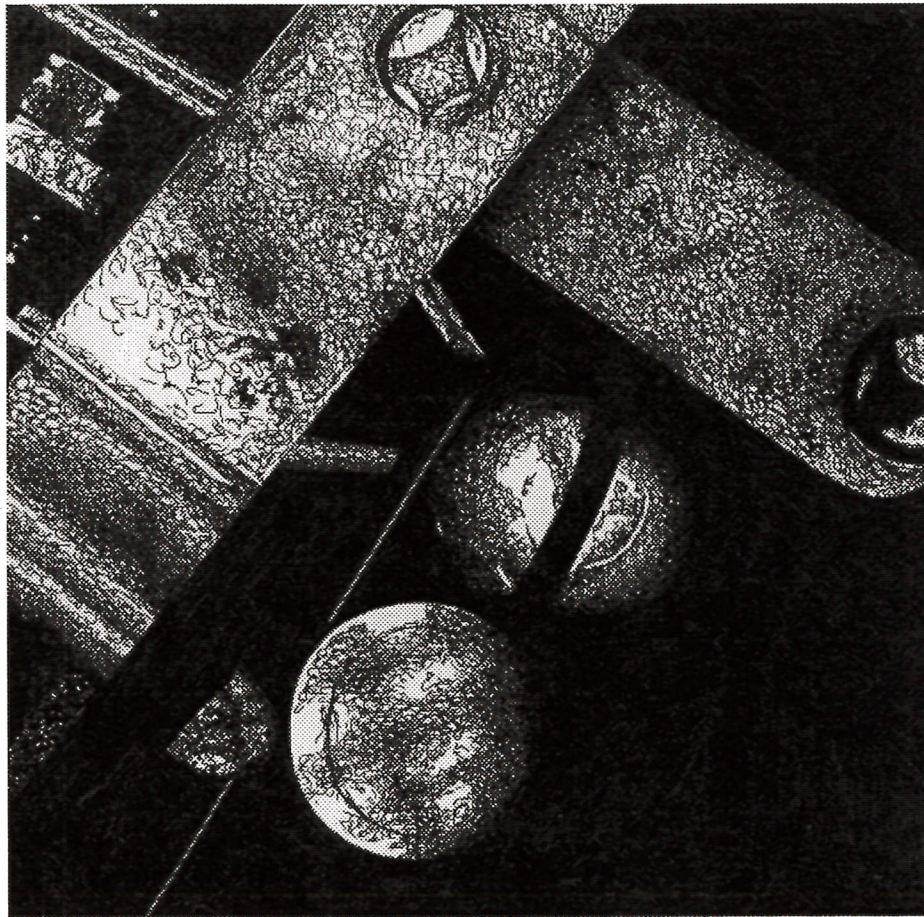
WHITE CHARCOAL

PAUL FENTON



OIL CHANGE

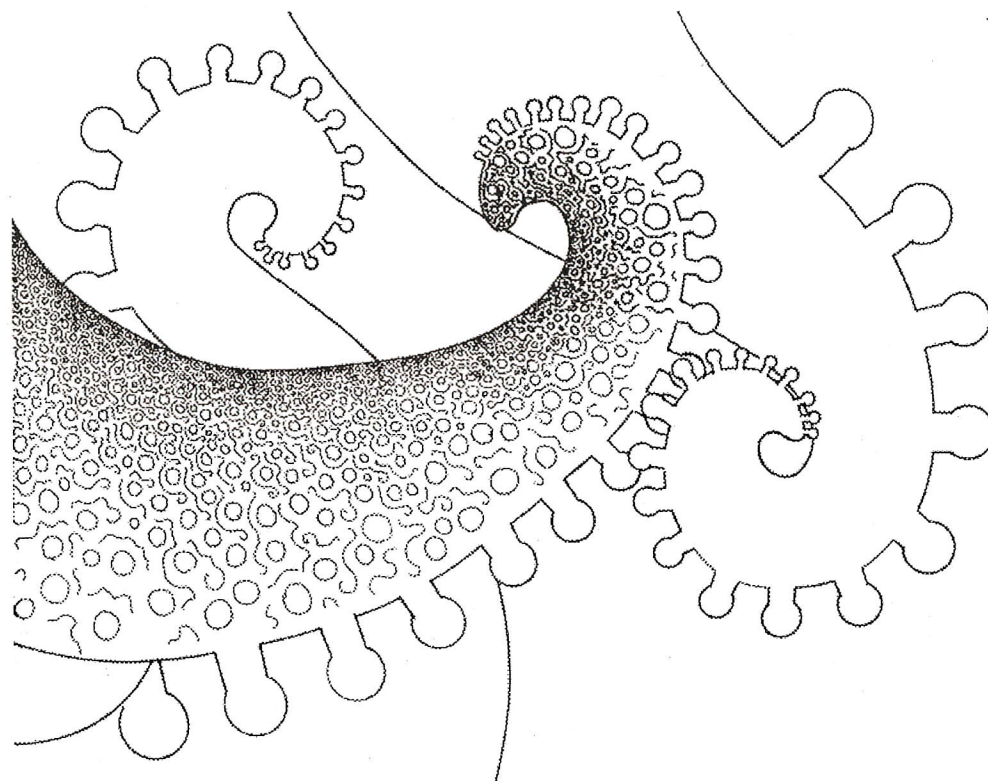
STEVEN KAUTZ



STARFISH

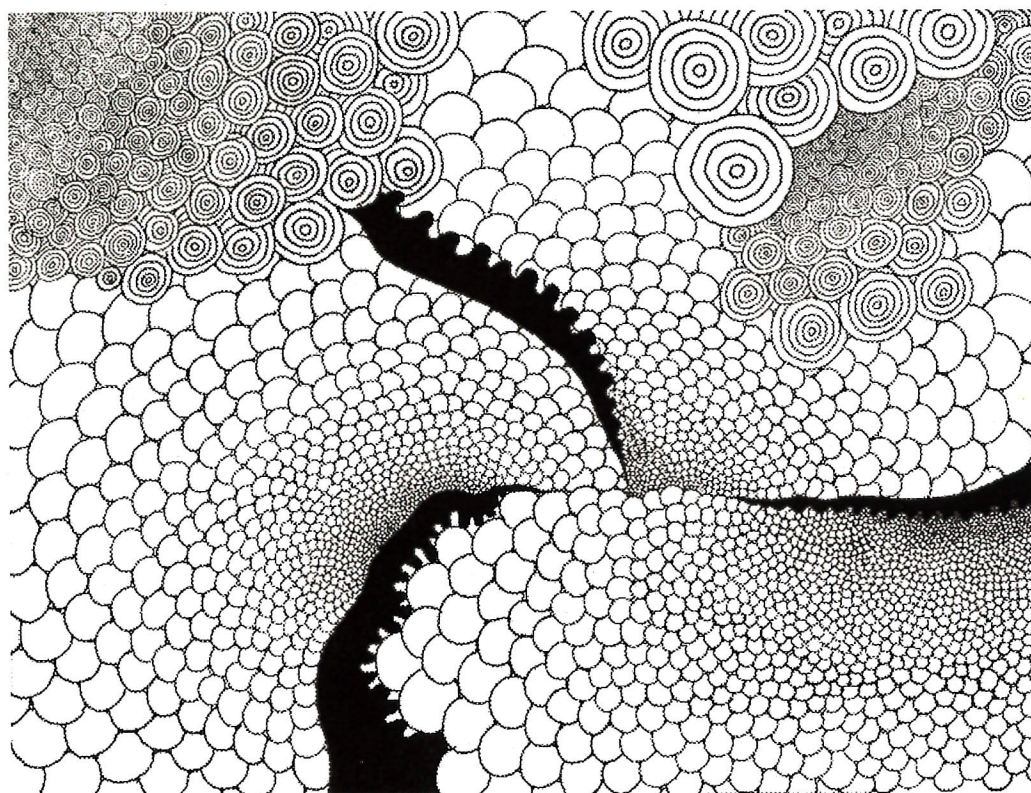
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EMILY KRUTSCH



DROWNING

EMILY KRUTSCH







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